

Le Journal des Médecines

2017 n°29



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“Stinging Pain”
in Assyro-Babylonian Medical Texts:
Some Considerations¹

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Abstract: The Assyro-Babylonian verbs *zaqātu*, *saḫālu* and *dakāšu*, and the related substantives *siḫlu*, *siḫiltu* and *dikšu* are the most common words denoting the action “to sting” (said of a pain) and the “stinging pain” itself. The purpose of this paper is to analyse these words by examining different types of texts (especially medical, but also omens and literary), to attempt to give an overview of stinging pain and its different shades.

INTRODUCTION

The first aspect on which every culture (past and present) relies to understand the nature of diseases is the pain experienced by the patient. This is defined by *The International Association for the Study of Pain* as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.”²

Pain is a very subjective and complex phenomenon, not clearly definable and classifiable. Suffering it personally is very different from observing this experience in another. Indeed, the distance between us and the other is immeasurable, and it is impossible to share our suffering with someone else. That is to say, to feel the same pain as another would require that we became that person,³ which is of course impossible. Therefore the only way to communicate our own suffering and thus make it understandable to those around us is through the use of metaphor. The Italian anthropologist G. Pizza defines it as a “social action”, as it uses everyday language – inadequate to express the suffering body – in order to place the sick person in his/her social context.⁴ Furthermore, according to the theory of linguists G. Lakoff and M. Johnson the metaphor is part of everybody’s daily life, not only in language but also in thoughts and actions. In their opinion, “most of our ordinary conceptual system is

¹ The present paper is a re-elaborated version of part of my PhD thesis (“Le espressioni della sofferenza individuale nei testi assiro-babilonesi”) discussed at the University of Verona in 2014.

² For an in-depth analysis cf. <http://www.iasp-pain.org/Taxonomy>

³ Cf. Allué (1999: 119).

⁴ Cf. Pizza (2011: 114).

metaphorical in nature”,⁵ and conceptual metaphors might refer to different ideas.

Conceptual metaphors might plausibly be used by every culture – past and present – and developed by them in different ways. Among the most interesting conceptual metaphors of the Assyro-Babylonian language are those relating to illnesses and the pain experienced by the patient. One of the most recurring is “illness is (like) war”. Verbs commonly used in military contexts – such as *ṣabātu* “to seize”, and *kašādu* “to overcome” – are also found in medical texts, describing illness, pain, and suffering as something attacking the victim, as if he/she was at war.⁶ Another interesting Assyro-Babylonian conceptual metaphor is that concerning “stinging pain”:⁷ in other words “pain is (like) that caused by a scorpion, a thorn, etc.”.

In medical texts stinging pain is usually described by certain words. The most common are the verbs *zaqātu*, *saḫālu* and *dakāšu*, and the related substantives *siḫlu*, *siḫiltu* and *dikšu*, which probably define some of its different shades and degrees of intensity. By examining different kinds of texts⁸ – in particular medical ones, but also *omina* and literary writings dating to the end of the 2nd and the 1st millennium BC – this article offers a brief analysis of the most common words used to describe this sort of pain, in order to give a brief overview of the terms used by ancient scholars.

THE WORDS RELATING TO STINGING PAIN

One of the most common words concerning stinging pain attested in Assyro-Babylonian texts is the verb *zaqātu*, which is generally understood as “to sting”.⁹ It usually refers to the sting or wound (*ziqtu*)¹⁰ made by a scorpion, as in the following *omen* from the series *Šumma ālu*:

⁵ Lakoff/Johnson (1980: 4).

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of these terms cf. Salin (2015). Cf. also Couto-Ferreira (2007).

⁷ Nowadays it is considered as one of the possible symptoms of neuropathic pain, which might be caused by damage or disease affecting any part of the nervous system involved in bodily sensation (the somatosensory system). It is often described not only as “stabbing” or “stinging”, but also as “burning”, “tingling”, and/or “electrical”. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 287-289) and Scurlock (2014: 555-570).

⁸ The transcription offered of texts such as BAM and AMT is mainly based on that of the BabMed website (<http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/babmed/>).

⁹ CAD (Z: 56); AHw (1513).

¹⁰ CAD (Z: 132); AHw (1532). The noun might be used to indicate not only the sting (and the wound) produced by a scorpion, but also a disease. While the first case is especially attested in omens, the second is found both in medical and omen texts. In JoA. Scurlock’s opinion *ziqtu* is a “small and raised lesion, (...) with a white spot on the top”, and identifies it as a whitehead, which might become a blackhead (Scurlock/Andersen 2005: 228). Cf. also Labat (1957-1971: 232).

- (1) DIŠ GÍR.TAB MURU₄ SAG.DU-šú RA¹¹-su [...]

‘If a scorpion **stings** the middle of his head [...].’¹²

In medical texts – both diagnostic and therapeutic – and sometimes in *omina* it can be translated as either “to sting” or “to cause to sting”. It might occur in the whole body or in some specific area, such as the tongue, anus, or penis. In the following passages from SA.GIG and the omen series *Šumma Alamdimmu* it refers to the entire body, the eye muscles and the female breast:

- (2) DIŠ SU LÚ *bir-di* SA₅ UZU.MEŠ-šú *ú-zaq-qa-t[u-š]ú u ri-šu-tu*₄ ŠUB.ŠUB-su *ħa-ra-su* M[U.NI]

‘If a man’s body is full of *birdu* and his flesh **stings him**, and *rišutu* continually falls on him, *ħarasu*¹³ is it[s name].’¹⁴

- (3) DIŠ SAG.KI-šú GU₇-šú *ú-maħ-ħa-ša-ma* SA.MEŠ IGI^{II}-šú *ú-z[aq-qa-tú]-šú*
SA GÚ-šú GU₇.MEŠ-šú ŠU GU₄

‘If his temple devours¹⁵ him, causes him throbbing pain,¹⁶ and his eyes’ muscles **st[ing] him**, (and) his neck muscles continually devour him, “Hand of ghost”.’¹⁷

- (4) DIŠ MÍ UBUR GAR-*at-ma* GÍR-šú NU GA DU-*ak* MÍ BI *i-ra-am* NINDA.MEŠ GU₇

‘If a woman has a breast (containing milk), and it **stings her**, (her) milk does not run, this woman will love, she will eat breads’.¹⁸

In the following examples the verb *zaqātu* indicates a stinging pain occurring in the epigastrium, and in the patient’s hands and feet, respectively:¹⁹

¹¹ On the use of the various Sumerograms for the verb *zaqātu*, cf. CAD (Z: 57).

¹² Cf. Freedman (1998b: 142, Tab. 30, colophon Ex(1), l. 8). Interesting is the ritual from the therapeutic text BAM 398, rev. 4’-27’, in which numbness is compared to the sting of a scorpion (cf. Scurlock 2014: 565).

¹³ Following Stol it is a skin disease (Stol 2007: 235).

¹⁴ SA.GIG 33, l. 21. Cf. Heeßel (2000: 354), Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 86, Text. no. 3.281), Scurlock (2014: 236). Very similar is the therapeutic text BAM 409, ll. 19’-20’ (cf. Böck 2010a: 90, Text no. 2.9.7).

¹⁵ On the translation of the verb *akālu* cf. Salin (forthcoming), “La sofferenza individuale nei testi Assiro-Babilonesi. Un approccio antropologico-linguistico”.

¹⁶ Cf. Salin (2015: 323-325).

¹⁷ SA.GIG 4: 35-36. Cf. Labat (1951: 36), Fincke (2000: 185), Scurlock (2014: 35). Very similar are AMT 106, l. 1, and AMT 19, l. 1.

¹⁸ Cf. Böck (2000: 160, l. 162c). On this line cf. also Heeßel (2004: 578).

¹⁹ Other interesting examples are those concerning legs, fingers, and foot (cf. for instance BAM 108: 16, BAM 9, l. 52, CT 51 147, l. 12, respectively).

- (5) [DIŠ] NA [SAG ŠĀ[?]]-šú ú-*ḥa*-[*ma-su ú-ma*]-*ḥa-su ú-za-qat-su*
 ú GU7-šú NA BI A.[GA.ZI G]IG

‘[If] a man, his [epigastrium] burns him, causes him a throbbing pain, **stings him**, and devours him, this man i[s sick] with the A.[GA.ZI-illness].’²⁰

- (6) DIŠ L[Ú S]ÍG UGU-šú *iz*-[*za-az ...*]
 NUNDUM-šú ú-*ṣab-ba-ta* G[EŠTUII-šú *išaggumā* (?)]
 ÚḤ-*su il-la-ka* [...]
^{na4}KIŠIB GÚ-šú ŠÌG.ŠÌG-*su* DU₈.MEŠ-šú GU₇.[MEŠ-šú (?)]
 SA.GÚ-šú *šag-gu* ŠU^{II}-šú *u* G[ÌRII-šú]
 ú-*šam-ma*-<*ma*>-šú ú-*zaq-qa-t[a-šú]*
 ŠĀ-[šú] *e-te-né-la-a la i-a[r-ru]*
 [zu-*mur-šú ši*]m-*ma-tum ú-kal*
 [mi-*na-tú-šú*]ú *it-ta-na-áš-pa-k[a]*
 [...]
a-na ZI-*e na-za-az-zi* DU₁₁.DU₁₁ *mu-uq*
 [NA BI *ki*]š-*pi ep-šu-šú-ma*
 [ina NINDA.MEŠ š]u-*kul ina* KAŠ NAG

‘If a ma[n, his ha]ir sta[nds up, ...], his lips are seized, [his] ea[rs buzz], his saliva runs, [...], his cervical vertebrae causes him a throbbing pain, his ...²¹ de[vours him], his neck muscles are stiff, his hands and [his feet] are numb, (and) **stin[g him]**, [he] continually heaves (but) he cannot vomit, [his body] de[vours him] with paralysis, his [limbs] continually falter, [...], he is slow to get up, to stand up, to speak, [wit]chcraft has been performed against [this man], and he has been given (bewitched) bread to eat (and bewitched) beer to drink’.²²

Interesting are the cases concerning the stinging pain occurring in the penis – sometimes during ejaculation or urination – and in the anus. Some examples from therapeutic texts follow:

²⁰ BAM 75, ll. 1-2. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 287, Text no. 13.21: 1-2). Also in STT I 96: l. 20.

²¹ The word *piṛu* seems denoting a part of the body, but it has not been identified yet.

²² VAT 13644//VAT 13609+VAT 13665//K 3394+9866. Cf. Abusch/Schwemer (2011: 263, ll. 1-13), and BAM 56, rev. 9.

(7) DIŠ NA GIŠ-šú *ú-zaq-qa-ta-šú* NUMUN ^ú[...]

(...)

[D]IŠ NA GIŠ-šú *ú-zaq-qa-ta-šú* NUMUN GADA x [x *ina* ^{urudu}ŠEN].¹TUR[?] *tara*¹-*bak*
ina KUŠ SUR-*re* TI

‘If a man, his penis **stings him**, seed of [...].

(...)

If a man, his penis **stings him**, seed of flax [...], decoct [it] in a small pot[?] (and) spread it on leather. He will recover.’²³

(8) [DIŠ N]A GIŠ-šú *ú-zaq-qa-su* U₄-*ma* KÀŠ.MEŠ-šú *i-šá-ti-nu re-ḥu-su* ŠUB-*a*
[*ina*] ŠÀ-šú *ša-bit-ma ana* MUNUS DU-*ka* LÁ LUGUD *gi-na-a ina* GIŠ-šú DU-*ak*
[NA.B]I *mu-ša* GIG (...)

‘If a man, his penis **stings him** when he urinates (or) ejaculates, he is seized [in] his abdomen, and he is “diminished” when he has intercourse with a woman, and pus constantly flows from his penis, [that ma]n is sick with the *mušu*-disease. (...).’²⁴

(9) DIŠ NA DÚR GIG DÚR-šú *ú-zaq-qat*^{min}-*su* ŠÀ.MEŠ-šú *in-n*[*i-bi-tu*]
ú-ta-sàl A.GEŠTIN.NA KAŠ.SAG ŠEG₆-*šal tu-kaš-ša ana* DÚR-[šú DUB-*ak*]

‘If a man is ill in the anus, (and) his anus **stings him**, his insides are bloated, he suffers from constipation. Boil vinegar and fine beer, cool (it) and pour it into his anus.’²⁵

A different kind of stinging pain is that indicated by *saḥālu*, which is usually related to the prick of a thorn. This verb is generally understood as “to pierce, to sting, to stab, etc.”,²⁶ and is mainly attested in therapeutic texts, referring to many different parts of the body, such as the pubic region of a woman, and a man’s teeth:

(10) DIŠ MUNUS Û.TU-*ma e-la-an ú-ri-šá ú-sa-ḥal-ši* *em-ša-ša* TAG.MEŠ-*ši*
MUNUS BI Ì.RA DAB-*si* (...)

²³ BAM 182+, ll. 2’; 5’. Cf. Geller (2005: 188-193, Text no. 31), and Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 91, Text no. 4.9).

²⁴ BAM 112+, ll. 17’-19’. Cf. Geller (2005: 56-65, Texts nos. 3, ll. 16’-17’, and 4, ll. 17’-19’. Very similar is Text no. 4, ll. 34’-36’).

²⁵ BAM 182+, ll. r. 11’-12’. Cf. Geller (2005: 193, Text no. 31).

²⁶ CAD (S: 237); AHw (1003).

‘If a woman gives birth and her pubic region **stings her**, her hypogastric region continually touches her, *niru* seizes this woman (...).²⁷

- (11) DIŠ NA ZÚ.MEŠ-šú *i-sah-ḫa-la-šú*
ana TI-šú (...)

‘If a man, his teeth **sting him**, to cure him (...).²⁸

This verb is also attested in anti-witchcraft rituals, especially in the so-called “substitution rites”.²⁹ In these, figurines representing one (or more) person, gods, demons or evildoers are used as substitutes for those who cannot be present at the ritual procedure.³⁰ When, for instance, the *āšipu* (or the patient) removes the thorn of a date palm from the figurine representing the patient himself, and sticks it into the figurines of warlock and witch, he is sending back the evil they previously brought upon the victim. In such cases the conceptual metaphor relating the prick caused by a thorn and the type of pain perceived by the patient is clear; “pain is (like) that caused by a thorn”. An example follows:

- (12) *di-ni* EŠ.BAR *šur-ši šul-li-ma-an-ni-ma*
^{giš}DÁLA GIŠIMMAR *šá* UGU NU-[MU *ušaḫḫaṭ ina muḫḫi šalmīšunu ú*]-*tak-kap*
lu-mun-šú-nu ana UGU-šú-nu GUR-*ra* [*kiš-pu-šú-nu lu(?) p*]*a-áš-ru*
ki-su-ia lip-pa-aṭ-ru ^{lu}UŠ11.ZU ^{mí}U[Š11.ZU *lu sa-ḫi-lu*]

‘Provide a decision for my case, keep me safe!

[I remove] the thorn of a date palm from the head of [my] figurine, (then) I stick³¹ (it) [into the head(s) of their figurines].

May the evil they did return to them, [may their] witchcrafts be undone!

May my bonds be released, (while) may my war[lock (and) my witch **be stung!**]³²

²⁷ BAM 240, ll. 17'-18'. Cf. also Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 281, Text no. 12.120), and Böck (2010b: 112). Whereas the latter interprets Ì.RA as “*niru*”, the former translates it as “striking”, probably considering RA as “to sting” with prefix ì.

²⁸ BAM 26, ll. 1-2. Cf. also Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 419, Text no. 18.4).

²⁹ Cf. in particular Schwemer (2007: 205-208); Ambos (2010); Abusch/Schwemer (2011: 22-23); Verderame (2013).

³⁰ As Hubert and Mauss rightly state, “L’image n’est, en somme, définie que par sa fonction, qui est de rendre présente une personne” (Hubert/Mauss 1902-1903: 66).

³¹ Interesting is the use of the less common *takāpu*, another verb indicating stinging pain, which usually denotes a puncture (cf. CAD T: 68; AHW: 1305).

³² K 3196+3344//VAT 13611. Cf. Abusch/Schwemer (2011: 252, Text no. 8.1, ll. 45''-48'').

Sahālu might be accompanied by the related substantive *siḫlu*,³³ which might denote both the “thorn”, and the “stinging pain”, as the following examples from the Gilgameš Epic and an anti-witchcraft ritual show:

- (13) *lu-ú-up-te* ^dGÍŠ-*gím-maš a-mat ni-šir-ti*
u AD.ḪAL *š[á ilī^{meš} ka-a-šá lu-u]q-bi-ka*
šam-mu šu-ú ki-ma ed-de-et-t[i ši-kin-šú² š]á-k[i]n
si-ḫi-il-šú GIM *a-mur-din-nim-ma ú-sa[h-ḫal qāti-k]a*

‘I will reveal, Gilgameš, a secret matter,
 and [I will] tell you a mystery [of the gods].
 It is a plant, its [appearance] is like the boxthorn,
its thorn is like the bramble’s, and **it will sting** your hands.’³⁴

- (14) *[k]i-ma* A.MEŠ *šá* SU *i-šá-ḫa-ṭu-ma*
[k]i-š-pu ru-ḫu-ú ru-su-ú
[s]i-iḫ-lu up-šá-š-u-u ḪUL.MEŠ
[š]á ina SU.MU GÁL-ú
li-pa-áš-ra-an-ni-ma ana UGU-šú-nu
u ra-ma-ni-šú-nu li-tu-ur

‘Just as the water is washed off (my) body, so may the witchcraft, magic, sorcery,
stinging pain, (and) evil machinations which are in my body be released from me and
 may return to them, themselves!’³⁵

Interesting are the cases in which *sahālu* or *siḫlu* are associated to UZU (=šīru “meat, flesh”), denoting a particular disease (or perhaps a metaphor for an uncomfortable feeling),³⁶ which might be intended as “stinging pain of the flesh”. An example from the Dream-Book follows:

³³ CAD (S: 237). AHW does not register this substantive.

³⁴ *Gilgameš Epic* Tab. XI, ll. 281-284. Cf. George (2003: 720) and Pettinato (2004: 132).

³⁵ VAT 10094+VAT 10989//VAT 13611. Cf. Abusch/Schwemer (2011: 253, Text no. 8.1, ll. 61’-66’’).

³⁶ For a discussion cf. Oppenheim (1956: 270, note no. 42).

(15) [DIŠ UZ]U KA₅.A GU₇ *si-ḫi-il* UZU

‘If he eats the meat of a fox: *siḫil šīri* (=stinging pain of the flesh?).’³⁷

The other noun related to *saḫālu*, that is *siḫiltu*,³⁸ occurs only sporadically. It denotes not only “sting”, but also “stinging pain”, and is attested only in a few medical and omen texts. An example is:

(16) KA.INIM.MA *ana si-ḫi-il-ti* GIDIM (...)

‘Recitation for the **stinging pain** (caused by) a ghost (...).’³⁹

The verb *dakāšu* can be understood as “to pierce, to sting”,⁴⁰ normally concerning – like *saḫālu* – the prick of a thorn. It is very infrequently attested in medical texts, in one case accompanied by the related substantive *dikšu*:⁴¹

(17) DIŠ NA SAG ŠĀ-šú *i-ḫa-maṭ-su i-dak-ka-su* Úḫ-su x[...]
U₄.DA SÁ.SÁ (...)

‘If a man, his epigastrium burns him, (and) **stings him**, his phlegm is [...], *ṣētu* has reached him. (...)’⁴²

(18) DIŠ NA *di-ik-šá* TUKU-*ma ki-ma ṣil-le-e ú-dāk-k[as-su]*⁴³
ŠU.GIDIM.MA (...)

‘If a man has a **piercing pain** and **it stings him** like a thorn, illness “Hand of ghost”. (...)’⁴⁴

In the last example the type of pain perceived by the patient is clearly explained by the

³⁷ Cf. Oppenheim (1956: 270, Text no. 8.1, l. II x+7). For other examples cf. also Oppenheim (1969: 162, ll. 18’-18’), and Lauinger (2012: 102).

³⁸ CAD (S: 235); AHw (1040).

³⁹ KAR 56 r. 1. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 289, Text no. 13.33).

⁴⁰ CAD (D: 34). AHw (151) intends it as “etwa ausbeulen, austreiben”.

⁴¹ CAD (D: 137). AHw (169) translates it “Ausbauchung, Schwellung”, followed by Labat (1957-1971: 231) and Köcher (1978: 38, note no. 94).

⁴² AMT 45, 6, ll. 6-7. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 287, Text no. 13.20), and Stol (2007: 20, and 26). See now tablet *K 2386+* Johnson (2014: 14-16).

⁴³ Cf. the different interpretation of BabMed (http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/babmed/Corpora/BAM-3/BAM-3_-216).

⁴⁴ BAM III 216, ll. 29’-30’. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 289, Text no. 13.31).

metaphor “it stings him like a thorn”.

Dikšu is more frequent than the verb, and occurs in both diagnostic and therapeutic texts. It might be generally used to indicate stinging pain or a specific disease, and might occur in different parts of the body.

- (19) DIŠ NA DÚR.GIG GIG-*ma di-ik-ša* TUKU NINDA u A ŠÀ-šú *la i-m[a-ḥar]*
 ÚḪ *ina* DÚR-šú *ú-ta[b]-ba-ka* (...)

‘If a man is sick in the anus, and has a **stinging pain**, and his abdomen cannot receive food and water, liquid runs from his anus. (...).⁴⁵

- (20) DIŠ UB.MEŠ-š[ú] DU₈.MEŠ SAG ŠÀ-šú *di-ik-ša*[?] T[UK[?] *pi-q*] *a la pi-qa* ÚŠ [*ina*]
 KIR4-šú DU-*ku* Á^{II}-šú SIG.MEŠ NÍG.ZI.[IR] ŠUB.ŠUB-*su* IGI^{II}-šú ÚŠ *šu-u[n-n]u-*
 [*a*]-*a* ŠU^dAMAR.UTU *a-dir-ma* GAM

‘If his limbs[?] are loose, his epigastrium has a **stinging pain**, blood on repeated occasions flows from his nose, his arms are continually weak, affliction continually falls upon him, his eyes are suffused with blood: “Hand of Marduk”. He will be worried and (then) he will die.’⁴⁶

- (21) [DIŠ NA] *di-kiš*^{giš} GIGIR GIG-*ma* ŠÀ-šú u TÙN-šú GU₇.MEŠ-šú (...)

‘[If a man] is sick with **stinging pain** (because of riding in) a chariot, and his abdomen and his liver[?] continually devours him (...).⁴⁷

- (22) [...] ŠÀ-šú KÚM TUKU.TUKU *di-kiš* GABA GIG [...] *-ḥa-ru sa-ḥa ḥa-aḥ-ḥa ši-ḥat*
 UZU.ME [...] *-aḥ-ḥa* DAB.MEŠ-*su* *ú-sa-al ina su-a-[li-šú ...]* x-šú *nu-pu-ḥa ina lam*
 DUGUD-šú NA BI x x [...] TÙM^{lu}ḪAL *qí-ba la* GAR-*an* (...)

‘[If ...] his abdomen has continually fever, he is sick with **stinging pain** in the chest, [...], *sahḫu*, *ḥahḫu*, wasting away of the flesh, [...] continually seizes him, he coughs, (and) when he coughs [...] are bloated, before it becomes difficult for him, that man

⁴⁵ BAM 96+, iii 15’-16’. Cf. Geller (2005: 164-165, Text no. 26, iii, ll. 15’-16’).

⁴⁶ SA.GIG 22, ll. 34-35. Cf. Heeßel (2000: 260), Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 77, Text no. 3.238) and Scurlock (2014: 190).

⁴⁷ AMT 96, 1, l. 17. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 23-24, Text no. 2.37).

[...], the diviner should not make a prognostication (...).⁴⁸

In the following example from the second tablet of the series *Maqlû*, the substantive is followed by UZU.MEŠ, creating an expression very similar to *siḫil šīri*:

(23) *lu-u di-kiš UZU.MEŠ šim-ma-[tú ri-mu-tú]*
[lu-u mim-m]a lem-nu šá šu[ma la na-bu-u]
[lu-u mim-m]a e-piš le-mut-ti šá [a-me-lu-ti]
[šá šab-ta]-ni-ma mu-šá u ur-ra U[Š.MEŠ-an-ni]
 (...)

‘Be it *dikiš šīri* (=stinging pain of the flesh?), paralysis, numbness,
 be it [anythi]ng evil that has not been named,
 be it [anythi]ng that causes suffering to humanity,
 that seizes me and continually purses me day and night, (...).⁴⁹

Even in this case it might be suggested the literal translation “stinging pain of the flesh”⁵⁰, probably denoting a determined disease. Interesting is its closeness to *šimmatu*⁵¹ and *rimûtu*⁵², words indicating paralysis and numbness, often caused by the sting of a scorpion or the bite of a snake.

In any case, it is possible to state that both the verb *dakāšu* and the noun *dikšu* denote the stinging pain normally caused by a thorn, but perhaps designate a different degree of intensity in comparison with *saḫālu*.

CONCLUSION

In general, when reading the texts cited in this paper it is very difficult to understand the intensity of the stinging pain expressed by the words discussed here. In fact, modern scholars have translated these terms in various ways, sometimes without a clear distinction among them. Indeed, verbs and related substantives have been taken to describe a “stinging”, “piercing”, “stabbing” or “needling” pain indistinctively.

A specific study on the matter has not yet been done, but in *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine*, JoA. Scurlock gives a brief interpretation of *saḫālu* and *dakāšu*; she

⁴⁸ AMT 51, 2, ll. 2-6. Cf. Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 183, Text no. 8.93).

⁴⁹ *Maqlû* Tab. II, ll. 64-67. Cf. Abusch (2015a: 59, ll. 64-67), and Abusch (2015b: 60, ll. 64-67).

⁵⁰ For a different interpretation cf. Abusch (2015a: 59), who translates it as “swelling”.

⁵¹ CAD (Š: 7); AHw (1238).

⁵² CAD (R: 363); AHw (987).

suggests that the former could indicate “a brief and relatively mild needling sensation”, while the latter might describe “the same type of pain, only more intense and continuous”.⁵³ In my opinion, there is little evidence for such a conclusion.

Perhaps, presuming its similarity to that caused by a scorpion, we may suppose that the pain denoted by *zaqātu* is very sharp, while that indicated by *saḥālu* and *dakāšu* (and related substantives) is less intense, inasmuch as it generally describes the puncture of a thorn, but some questions remain unanswered. Were *saḥālu* and *dakāšu* considered as synonyms and used in an interchangeable way, or was there a distinction between them? If so, which one was used to denote a more intense pain? Furthermore, how were they considered in comparison with *zaqātu*?

In conclusion, even though it is very difficult to understand the precise meanings of these words, it is possible to state that the Assyro-Babylonians made an attempt to describe how the patient felt, sometimes using metaphors, that “serve to make objective something, which is indeed subjective by definition, and to provide it with a ‘social’ and ‘technical’ explanation”,⁵⁴ and sometimes taking advantage of the lexical repertoire that offered the possibility of different expressions – although often synonyms – to which more technical meanings could be associated.

⁵³ Scurlock/Andersen (2005: 288). It is worth noting the presence – though very rare – of another verb denoting stinging pain, i.e. *šaḡāru* (CAD S: 13; AHW: 1179). It is usually understood as “to pierce (with an arrow or a weapon)”, but unfortunately it is only attested in a few broken texts (cf. for instance Stol 1993: 93). JoA. Scurlock suggests its similarity to *dakāšu* (cf. Scurlock/Andersen 2005: 733, note no. 17).

⁵⁴ Salin (2015: 335).

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Le Journal des Médecines Cunéiformes est publié par Azugal, association loi 1901 sans but lucratif, 14 rue de la Salle, 78100 Saint-Germain-En-Laye, représentée par A. Attia. Imprimeur : Cydergies, 208 avenue Roland Garros, BP 136, 78531 Buc Cedex. Dépôt légal : 06-2017. ISSN 1761-0583. Directrice de la publication : A. Attia, responsable de la rédaction : G. Buisson, secrétaire de rédaction : M. Worthington.