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An Alternate Ending to an Akkadian Letter-Prayer to Amurrum (AbB 12, no. 99)

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dichotomous genders created in the beginning of Atra-šāšīs supplemented by the creation of a third category.

However the last example is interpreted, there is clearly a pattern of ironic self-citation in Atra-šāšīs. For example, it can be found also in the Gilgameš epic. MORAN (2001:173-4) described how the phrase šeššet urri u sebe mušša, “six days and seven nights” (I 194 = [X 58, 135, 235] = XI 209) serves as a pivot in the epic: it marks first the transformation from non-human to human, then from human to non-human, and finally from non-human back to human. The same phrase thus carries out opposed movements.

Another example of ironic self-citation in Gilgameš is the line šītīnšu ilum-ma šullultašu amēlātu, “two thirds of him is a god but a third of him is human” (I 48 = IX 51). This line appears first in a long praise of Gilgameš, where the emphasis is clearly on his divinity. The fact that he is two thirds divine is highlighted as an example of his exceptional status. But when the line reappears, it is spoken by the scorpion woman to her husband. The two are discussing whether to let Gilgameš enter the tunnel that will lead him to Ut-napišti, and the scorpion man has just stated: ša illikannāši šir ilit zumuršu, “The one who has come to us: His body is the flesh of the gods” (IX 49). Standing against this line, the scorpion woman’s statement that Gilgameš is two thirds god, but one third human, reverses the original emphasis: she highlights the part of his body that is human, and not made of the flesh of the gods.


Helle, S. forthcoming. ‘The Dynamics of a Three-Sex Model’.


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96) An Alternate Ending to an Akkadian Letter-Prayer to Amurrum (AbB 12, no. 99) — Twenty-five years ago W. H. van Soldt published an interesting letter-prayer from a man named Ardum to the god Amurrum. In this short note, I offer an alternative translation of the prayer’s final sentence, which explains how a bed-ridden man delivered his prayer to the god and granted others the authority to lay the petition before the deity.

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Obv. 1 a-na be-êl-i4a mar.-mar. tu
2 ša i-na ma-ḫar 4utu qī-bi-is-sā ša-ma-at
3 qī-bi-ma
4 an-na ar-da-um sag.ēr-ka-ma
5 it-itii a-nil il ti-ab-na-an-ni-ma su-qā-am
6 tu-še-te-qā-an-ni
7 ū ša-ati-ši udu siskur.siskur.re a-la-qē-ku-ma
8 a-na i-lu-ti-ka ka-bi-it-tim
9 i-ip-pu-uš
10 i-na-an-na na-ak-ru ik-ša-da-an-ni-ma
11 mu-uš-ke-né-ku-ma a-aḫ-ḫu-a
12 ū-ul i-a-ri-ru-ni

Rev. 13 šum-ma AN ka3 ra-bi-tun ša ra am
14 i-na ša-nā na-da-a-ku di-ki-an-ni
15 udu siskur.siskur.re ū-āḫ-da-am
16 lu-ul-qé-a-am-ma a-na ma-ḫar dingir-ti-ka  
17 lu-ul-li-ka-ak-ku  
18 da mu ZA ši KI il ma ZU  
19 la ma x1 ma qa-in-ni la ṣp-pa-ra-[r]  
20 a-mi-ru-ia a-na dingir-ti-ka  
21 ba-ni-tim  
22 ú-ša-aq-ri-ib

Although some of the signs have resisted decipherment, leaving small gaps in our understanding of the letter, van Soldt’s lively translation captures well the pathos of Ardum’s dire situation:

Speak to my lord Amurrum whose pronouncement is heard before Šamaš: Thus says Ardum, your servant. You have created me among men and you have made me pass (safely) along the street. Also, I used to bring you a sheep offering every year and I prepared (it) in honor of your venerable divine rank. (But) now an enemy has befallen me and I am miserable. (Even) my brothers do not come to my help. If your great divine power . . . (me), raise me up from the bed on which I am lying. (Then) let me come to you, to your divine presence, bringing a generous sheep offering. . . . May my family not be dispersed. May the one who sees me submit a petition to your lofty divine power.

The final sentence in lines 20–22 is the point of present interest: āmirūya ana ilūṭka bantītim usaqribū (see below for the change in the verb’s number), which I suggest be rendered, “those who look upon me (hereby) submit (this petition)5) to your beautiful divinity.”

The first step in justifying this translation is to note a previously unrecognized mistake in the Akkadian: there is disagreement between the plural subject and the text’s singular verb. Since it is difficult to explain the presence of the distinctive 1cs pronominal suffix on a nominal plural substantive, it seems more likely that the mistake lies with the verb. I suggest, therefore, that the scribe should have written ú-ša-aq-ri-bu rather than ú-ša-aq-ri-ib. This mistake joins at least four others, already recognized by van Soldt (marked above but also including two erasures, one between the final two signs in line 11 and the other between the ŠA and the AG of our verb), and gives further support to his reasonable suggestion that the letter is a scribal exercise (p. 84, note a).

The next step is to consider briefly the role of āmirū in prayers and other texts. Although onlookers may have diametrically opposed reactions to what they see, ranging from annoyance (elī āmeritya amrus anāku, “I annoy the one who looks upon me,” Maqṭū 17) to jubilation (āmirūya ana dārāti dalīṭika līdlūla, “may those who look upon me sing your praises forever,” as found in incantation-prayers),7) in all cases āmirū must be people who are proximate and/or acquainted with the person they are looking upon. Although āmirū were not limited to friends and family (see, e.g., āmirṣu iñā sūqi līṭa’id ilūṭka, “may the one who looks upon him in the street praise your divinity”),8) āmirū would certainly have included them. Finally, given the fact that āmirū are at times the ones said to have rejoiced at the recovery of a supplicant, it is not unreasonable to consider the idea that they were also concerned enough to act on a supplicant’s behalf. I therefore suggest that āmirū in our letter are family, friends and/or acquaintances of Ardum, though apparently not his brothers (lines 11–12).

Another important element in justifying the alternative translation is the content of the letter, which clearly describes Ardum as bedridden. His condition at the time of writing the letter contrasted sharply with his former abilities, when he passed along the street and brought offerings to the deity (lines 5–9), an action that he promises to resume if the deity would grant his petitions (15–17). If Ardum was in fact bedridden, he could not possibly have brought the letter to Amurrum; others would have needed to help him. I suggest the āmirū are those people.

In his article “Two Letter-Prayers to Amurrum” Hallo discusses the “mailing instructions” of our letter, as he calls the final lines, and compares them to what he believes is a similar phrase in a Sumerian letter-prayer to Amurrum. He translates the final sentence in our letter in a similar manner as van Soldt: “May whoever sees me forward (my message) to your well-disposed godliness.”9) I agree that the sentence concerns itself with the delivery of the supplicant’s prayer. But this is not expressed as a wish, as Hallo’s translation would suggest. The verb is clearly a preterite. As is well known, preterites may function performatively in some contexts, including OB letters.10) This is precisely how I believe the verb is working here.
In light of these observations, I suggest that the last sentence of this letter-prayer is not a petition or mailing instructions. Rather, it explains how a bedridden supplicant delivered his letter-prayer to the deity and performatively authorized his āmirū as his proxies in laying the supplication before the deity’s feet: “those who look upon me (hereby) submit (this petition) to your beautiful divinity.”


2) No copy has been published but a photograph of the tablet is available on the British Museum’s website (see: http://goo.gl/wrcJQR).

3) As van Soldt notes (p. 85, note k), the understanding of AN ka as dingir-ka is problematic, since we would expect an intervening phonetic complement, as is found in the other instances of ilātu plus pronominal suffix in the letter (see lines 16 and 20); thus, we expect DINGIR-ut-ka. In light of this, it may be best to read dingir-ut-ka here, though this does little to clarify the context.

4) Might this sign be a malformed SU?

5) Including the present attestation, we now have three instances of qerēbu in the Š-stem that also occur in contexts in which presenting a request makes contextual sense (see CAD Q, 239–240 and AHw, 917 for references). Although the meaning is not absolutely certain, I see no warrant to contest the semantics of the verb.Hallo’s translation agrees (see below). Van der Toorn renders the final sentence quite differently, “Then I shall make those who see me speak highly of your friendly divinity,” without comment (Family Religion, 131).


10) See Mayer, Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen „Gebetsbeschwörungen.“ 192 and GAG §79b.

11) I thank Prof. van Soldt for corresponding with me about this letter and providing me with his decipherment notes. I alone am responsible for the suggested translation.

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97) Kār-Šamaš as a south-western palace town of the Sealand I kingdom — The publication of unprovenanced archival, divinatory, and literary texts from the Sealand I kingdom has renewed interest in this second millennium polity and its geographic extent (DALLEY 2009; GEORGE 2007; 2013; GABBAY 2014). The administrative palace archive published by Dalley has been suggested to come from the area (east) of Nippur, and possibly the divinatory and literary texts as well (DALLEY 2009: 9; GEORGE 2013: 142; GABBAY 2014: 147 n.9). There is, however, some evidence for a south-western origin of the palatial archive. A town by the name of Kār-Šamaš figures fairly prominently in these documents; it was either the very palace town where the archive comes from or one located in its immediate vicinity. I suggest to identify it with a town of the same name associated in earlier documents with Ur and the Old Babylonian kingdom of Larsa.

In the Sealand I material Kār-Šamaš, written KAR-Šamaš, appears in three contexts:

1- it was a place of some importance in the state administration, at least provincially, since one letter says that captured thieves were sent there, perhaps for judgment (CUSAS 9, 7: 28’);

2- it was a town where agricultural taxes were collected for the palace (CUSAS 9, 428; 443);

3- it was also a town mentioned in several administrative records pertaining to palatial malting and brewing (CUSAS 9, 190; 192; 206; 209; 211; 212; 213-220; 224; 244). In the latter context, the name of the town often appears in the rubric indicating where the barley and the malt were delivered, namely a-na Ė.GAL 7a KAR-Šamaš. Many more documents record similar deliveries to the palace without further specification; the maltsters and brewers being always the same...