

Transmission and Interpretation of Therapeutic Texts.

Šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl: a Case Study

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Abstract: Among the Assyro-Babylonian medical texts the therapeutic series *šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl*, probably composed during the reign of Assurbanipal, is an extremely interesting case study in order to explain how medical texts were received and medical knowledge transmitted among professionals. The series deals with the particular group of diseases affecting the head and is related to other groups of diagnostic and therapeutic texts. Moreover, it was the object of a commentary preserved in a tablet from Uruk (SpTU 1.47) dating from the fifth century BCE. This later document attests to the efforts of understanding difficult words and illustrates the continuity in the interpretation and study of ancient texts. The comprehensive consideration of these texts allows facing the problems concerning the instruments and methods Mesopotamian intellectuals used when employing technical lore and the texts that transmitted it.

Introduction

As many modern scholars have already pointed out,¹ Assyro-Babylonian medical texts – characterised by long lists of technical terms, such as names of diseases, plants and/or minerals – have always been difficult to understand as is revealed not only by the divergent translations of modern readers,² but also by different interpretations

of ancient scholars. Especially in the late period of the Mesopotamian history, even experts had some difficulties in reading texts composed several centuries before, as can be discovered by analysing copies and commentaries. For instance, in the present case study we will analyse the therapeutic texts dated to the 7th century BCE known from the *incipit* of the first tablet of its first sub-series as *šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl* (“If a man, his head contains heat”), which concerns symptoms and diseases occurring in the whole body. Over the course of time it has been studied and analysed by medical professionals – in particular those belonging to the Šangu–Ninurta family, active during the 5th–4th centuries BCE –, who re-elaborated on it, and produced an extract series based on its texts. This extract series,

¹ See, among others, Robson 2008, 461.

² Indeed, we must note that every translation is also an interpretation, as F.M. Fales states: “[...], problems of various orders regarding the ‘translation’ of such texts into our modern clinical framework – from actual linguistic renderings to much more complex correlations of thought and interpretative patterns – constitute a huge barrier to our grasping of the historically determined conditions of health and illness in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley during pre-Hellenistic Antiquity” (Fales 2014, 9).

the so-called UGU series, and the commentary on a single tablet (SpTU 1.47) are interesting examples that show the continuity of the study of ancient texts during these centuries – handing down the specific knowledge among professionals usually belonging to the same family or to the same group of specialists – and that allows us to develop some observations about the transmission and interpretation of medical knowledge in the Late Babylonian Uruk by the members of the Šangu-Ninurta family.

The therapeutic series and its extract series

The redaction of the therapeutic series *šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl* is attested by many texts and fragments found in Nineveh, dated to the reign of Assurbanipal (7th century BCE). Unfortunately, we are not well informed about its organisation. Nevertheless, its reconstruction is in part possible thanks to copies of its tablets, colophons indicating *incipits* or contents of tablets not yet found, and the UGU extract series³. The pioneering work of R. Campbell Thompson and L.W. King in 1906, who edited some of the therapeutic texts in their study entitled “Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum”,⁴ could be considered as the basis of the modern studies about the UGU series and the related problems.⁵

The whole series represents the production and redaction of a “new edition” of the therapeutic texts. As already said, we don’t know how it was organized, but we may suppose that, in comparison with the new edition of the diagnostic texts (SA.GIG) produced by Esagil-kin-apli in the Middle-Babylonian period, it followed the *ištu muḥḥi adi šēpi* order (i.e. “from head to toe”). In addition to the first sub-series that, as we noted above, brings the same title of the whole series, we are aware of some other sub-series.⁶ These sub-series are dedicated, for instance, to diseases relating to the eyes (*šumma amēlu ināšu marša*),⁷ to the nose and the breathing apparatus (*šumma amēlu napī appišu kabit*), to the kidney (*šumma amēlu kalīssu ikkalšu*),⁸ and to the *libbu* (*šumma amēlu su’ālam maruṣ ana kīs/š libbi itār*).⁹ For example, the latter is composed at least by five tablets devoted to diseases occurring in the central area of the body, usually rendered with the Assyro-Babylonian word “*libbu*”. The first tablet (BAM VI 574), which gives the title to the whole sub-series, relates recipes useful in the case of symptoms and/or diseases of the

³ For a discussion see Heeβel 2010a, 31; Scurlock 2014, 295; the former states that the text edited by Beckman and Foster (Assyrian Scholarly Texts in the Yale Babylonian Collection, in: E. Leichty (ed.), *A Scientific Humanist*, 11–14, 1988) could not be considered as the Catalogue of the series (Heeβel 2010a, 34), the latter sustains the opposite (Scurlock 2014, 295).

⁴ Campbell Thompson – King 1906.

⁵ It suffices to mention the following modern studies: Haussperger 2012; Janowski – Schwemer (eds) 2010; Scurlock 2014.

⁶ For a reconstruction of the series and the sub-series see Heeβel 2010a, 31; Scurlock 2014, 295.

⁷ See in particular Fincke 2000.

⁸ See in particular Geller 2005.

⁹ The translation of its *incipit* is difficult, and every modern scholar interprets it in a different way; for example, P. Attinger translates “Si un home souffre de toux grasse et que (la maladie) tourne en ‘ligature de l’intérieur’ (une forme de colique)” (Attinger 2008, 27); M. Haussperger proposes “Wenn jemand an einer Verschleimung erkrankt ist und diese zur Kühle des Leibesinneren wird” (Haussperger 2002, 35; 2012, 164); B. Böck translates “Wenn ein Mensch an (schwerer) Verschleimung (der Atemwege) leidet, diese aber umschlägt/übergeht in (die Krankheit, die gekennzeichnet ist durch Magen- und Darm)koliken” (Böck 2010, 69).

abdomen, stomach, intestines and belly.
Some lines follow:

1. DIŠ NA *su-a-lam* GIG *ana ki-iš*
ŠÀ GUR *šu-ru-uš* ^{GIŠ}NAM.TAR
šu-ru-uš ^{GIŠ}*šu-še*
2. ^Ú*tar-muš* ^ÚIGI-*lim* ^ÚIGI-*ešra*
^Ú*tu-lal* ^ÚŠAKIRA 7 ^Ú.ĪI.A ŠEŠ
TEŠ.BI SÚD
3. *ina* KAŠ ŠUB-*di* *ina* MUL *tuš-*
bat *ina* Á.GÚ.ZI.GA NU *pa-tan*
NAG.MEŠ-*ma* *ina-eš*

1. If a man suffers from cough with phlegm' secretion (and) changes to (the disease) *kīs/s libbi*; root of the *pillû*-plant, root of the *šuše*-plant,
2. *tarmuš*, *imḥur-lim*, *imḥur-ešra*, *tulal*, *šakirû*. Crush together these 7 plants,
3. put them in beer, leave them under the stars at night. Give him (them) continually to drink in the morning on an empty stomach and (he) will recover.¹⁰

The recipe, as usual in therapeutic texts, follows a given order: first of all, it presents the description of symptoms and/or the disease's name, second it gives the list of ingredients useful to cure the patient and (in some cases) also the instructions to prepare and to administer them. At the end – if not preceded by some incantation formulas or rituals – there is the prognosis, in most cases positive.

In Uruk archaeologists found another therapeutic series, dated to the 5th century BCE and composed of 45 tablets, also entitled *šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl*; it belonged to the Šangu-Ninurta family, the

members of which were *āšipus*.¹¹ Because the *incipit* of the series is identical to the one from Nineveh, we could assume that it is the same series. On the one hand it is not possible to find concordances between them, because in Uruk just some fragments of tablets nos. 41 and 45 have been found; on the other hand, it is also not possible to find any differences between the series found in Nineveh and the one found in Uruk. For the moment, we can just note the presence of these texts, not excluding neither one nor the other hypothesis.¹² Furthermore, in the same library, archaeologists found a sort of “abridged edition” of the UGU series, probably created by the members of this family¹³ in order to render this wide-ranging series more usable.¹⁴ Of this extract series have been found copies of the ninth and tenth tablets, edited in 1976 by H. Hunger as SpTU 1.44 and 46:¹⁵ if the former describes ill-

¹¹ In the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies German excavations brought to light 503 tablets and fragments of literary, medical and scholarly texts in the so-called “*āšipu*'s House”, in the eastern part of Uruk (area U XVIII). The texts found belonged to two families of *āšipus*, led by Šangu-Ninurta (late 5th Century BCE) and Ekur-zakir (early Hellenistic period), respectively. The whole group of texts has been published by Hunger and von Weiher in the series SpTU (I–V).

¹² See Heeßel 2010a, 33–34.

¹³ The genealogical tree of the Šangu-Ninurta family follows:



(see also Hunger 1976, 11; Clancier 2009, 52)

¹⁴ See Scurlock 2014, 329.

¹⁵ Hunger 1976.

¹⁰ The translation is provided by the author and is based on the transliteration of BAM VI 574 i 1–3. See also Böck 2010, 71; Haussperger 2002, 23.

nesses relating to the nose and the breathing apparatus, the latter concerns problems related to tongue, face, throat and lips. Both tablets have been written by the *āšipu* Šamaš-iddin, father of Anu-ikšur.

Some lines of SpTU 1.44, which is an excerpt of the UGU's sub-series *šumma amēlu šinnīšu marša* and *šumma amēlu napī appišu kabit*, follow:

1. DIŠ NA *na-piš* KIR₄-šú
DUGUD *ši-in-[na-ah]-ti-ru hi-miṭ*
UD.[DA...]
2. *ina še-rim là pa-tan* ÚKUR.RA
KA-šú *ta-[kap-pa]r* NA₄ *gab-u*
ana na-ḫi-[r]i-š[ú...]
3. EME-šú *dišip* LĀL.KUR.RA *ú-*
na-aṭ-ṭa *ina* A ÚKÚŠ
ÚEME.UR.KU GĪŠŠINIG RA-*su*
[...]
4. PA GĪŠŠINIG ŠIMLI
ŠIMGÚR.GÚR PA GĪŠŠU-š[i] 1-*niš*
GAZ SIM *ina* Ī.UD[U ḪE].ḪE *ina*
KUŠ SUR-ri [*irassu*] LĀ-*ma ina-*
eš

1. If a man, the breath of his nose is heavy, (he suffers from the) *šin-naḫtiri*-illness (and) *šētu* fever [...]
2. In the morning, on an empty stomach, you wipe his mouth with the *nīnû*-plant, apply alum on his nostrils, [...]
3. his tongue ... mountain's honey, wash him with water of cucumber, "dog's tongue", tamarisk [...]
4. you pound (and) sift together a branch of tamarisk, *burāšu*-juniper, *kukru*-plant (and) a liquorice, mix (it) in fat, rub (it) on leather, bind (it) on [his breast] and he will recover.¹⁶

¹⁶ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 53 (SpTU 1.44, 1–4). See also Heeßel 2010b, 55.

The presence of this extract series in the Šangu-Ninurta library "demonstrates that UGU was in active use by practicing physicians"¹⁷ also during the 5th century BCE and furthermore that the activity of the above-mentioned group of medical professionals was devoted to a sort of re-edition of the therapeutic texts. This proves the continuity in the study of ancient texts. Indeed, usually professional knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the following, typically among the members of the same family (but also among scholars belonging to the same elite). This practice was very common in the past:¹⁸ well known, for instance, are the cases of the *ummānu* active in the Neo-Assyrian period,¹⁹ and also of the medical experts of Hellenistic times.²⁰

Moreover, these extract series could be considered as a continuation of the re-elaboration process of the therapeutic texts started some centuries before. Indeed, we have already pointed out that *šumma amēlu muḫḫašu umma ukāl* can be considered as the "new edition" of the therapeutic texts, the composition of which is the result of the efforts due to specialists active during the 7th century BCE. For the completion of this complicated process, scholars of the late period usually composed commentaries, especially during the highest level of their advanced training, as the one presented in the following paragraph.

¹⁷ Scurlock 2014, 295.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that, beyond experts' families, it is possible to identify "intellectual elites", whose members did not belong to the same family but shared the same principles and discipline, especially from the time of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (see Nutton 2004, 53–71).

¹⁹ See, for instance, Cavigneaux 1982; Gesche 2001; Verderame 2008.

²⁰ See Nutton 2004, 37–52.

Besides, it is worth noting the presence of a copy (SpTU 5, 231) of the so-called *āšipu*'s Manual in the Šangu-Ninurta library, written by Rimut-Anu, brother of Anu-ikšur.²¹ This document – in which are listed all the texts that *āšipus* must study – is mostly known by Neo-Assyrian copies.²² The presence not only of this Manual, but also of some of the tablets listed in it, are other proofs of continuity in the transmission of knowledge, in particular the one of the *āšipus*.

The following table (tab. 1), in which the tablets owned by Anu-ikšur (the best-known member of the Šangu-Ninurta family) are grouped, could be considered as the mirror of the situation here presented:

EDITION	TOPIC OF THE TEXT	
	COPY	COMMENTARY
SpTU I, 28		SA.GIG 1
SpTU I, 31		SA.GIG 5
SpTU I, 32		SA.GIG 7
SpTU I, 33		SA.GIG 7
SpTU I, 38		SA.GIG 19
SpTU I, 45	Recipe for diseases occurring on the nose	
SpTU I, 47		<i>Šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl</i> ²³
SpTU I, 49		<i>Šumma amēlu ŠU.GIDIM.MA ibšassuma (Šumma amēlu šer'ān kišādišu ikkalšu 2)</i>
SpTU I, 50		<i>Šumma amēlu AN.TA.ŠUB.BA elišu inqut</i>
SpTU I, 51		<i>Šumma amēlu</i>

²¹ See Jean 2006, 162, and Clancier 2009, 52.

²² The best-preserved tablet has been published as KAR 44. See Jean 2006 for an in-depth analysis and study of the Manual.

²³ As already said, the tenth part of its extract series (SpTU 1, 46).

		<i>qaqqassu [...]</i> (<i>Buḥtu bīt Dābi-bi(?) 2</i>)
SpTU I, 56	Incantation(?)	
SpTU I, 59	Recipe	
SpTU I, 83		<i>Šumma Alamdimmû</i>
SpTU II, 8	<i>Bīt mēseri</i>	
SpTU III, 69	<i>Bīt mēseri</i>	
SpTU III, 90	<i>Šumma izbu</i>	
SpTU III, 99		<i>Šumma ālu</i>
SpTU IV, 151	<i>Šumma Alamdimmû</i>	
SpTU V, 241	<i>Maqlû</i>	
SpTU V, 248	Ritual	

Table 1 Tablets of Anu-ikšur.

As we can see, *āšipus* belonging to the Šangu-Ninurta family like Anu-ikšur formed their professional career by studying many texts – especially the diagnostic and therapeutic ones, but also *omina* – following the list written in the *āšipu*'s Manual, in the same way their colleagues and predecessors did some centuries before. This could be seen as one of the proofs that especially in this specific case the work of experts never stopped; texts were constantly studied, analysed and re-elaborated, showing continuity and progression of the professionals' activity during centuries.²⁴

The commentary to the extract series (SpTU 1.47)

As already said, among other texts, Šamašiddin wrote the copies of the ninth and the tenth tablets of the UGU extract series found in the Šangu-Ninurta library, i.e. the texts known as SpTU 1.44 and 1.46, respectively. In the present paragraph we will analyse some lines belonging to the second tablet here quoted, and its apparent commentary

²⁴ See, among others, Jean 2006, 162.

(SpTU 1.47)²⁵ written by Šamaš-iddin's son, Anu-ikšur, in order to better comprehend which points of the original texts have been taken into account (and which have not), and how they have been explained. The starting point of this analysis will be the edition of H. Hunger,²⁶ supplemented by the in-depth study of E. Frahm presented in his "Babylonian and Assyrian Texts Commentaries. Origins of interpretation."²⁷

The colophon of the commentary informs us that Anu-ikšur was, at the time of its composition, a *mašmaššu šeḫru* (that is a junior-*āšipu*), a professional at the beginning of his advanced training:

rev.
 1'. [...]
 2'. [...]
 3'. *ša²-[a²-tu² u šūt pî ša DIŠ amēlu (?) EME²]-šú²*
 4'. *eb²-[e²-et²-ma²malsûtu (?) ^{Id}60-ik]-šu-ur*
 5'. MAŠ.MAŠ [*šeḫri* (?) *mār Šangi*]-^d[*Ni*]n-urta
 6'. *pa-liḫ ^dME.ME li₆(ĤÉ) ša_x(DI)-qir_x(KA)*

rev.
 1'. [...]
 2'. [...]
 3'. *Šātu*²⁸ [and oral explanations relating to (the text) "If a man, his tongue]
 4'. is cram[ped". *Malsûtu* (=lecture) of Anu-ikšur,
 5'. [junior]-*āšipu*, [son of Šangu]-Ninurta.
 6'. May the one who respects Gula hold (this tablet) in esteem.²⁹

²⁵ Indeed, the presence of some passages that do not refer to SpTU 1.46 (see, among others, Frahm 2010, 172) is also worth noting.

²⁶ Hunger 1976.

²⁷ Frahm 2011.

²⁸ "Commentary". For a discussion about the term see Frahm 2011, 48–56.

As the study of P. Clancier³⁰ points out, the various members of the Šangu-Ninurta family gathered together a noteworthy group of documents, relating not only to the healers' profession, i.e. *āšipūtu*, but also to many other subjects, as for instance divination, astronomy, religion, mathematics and literature.³¹ Among these texts it is worth noting the presence of "training texts", i.e. lexical lists and school exercises, and also of commentaries, as, for instance, those relating to SA.GIG or, as already noted, the one concerning the series *šumma amēlu muḫḫašu umma ukāl*.³²

In general, commentaries are very interesting, because they allow us to understand what kind of problems scholars of the late periods had to face in reading and studying texts composed some centuries before. In particular, we can say that commentaries on therapeutic texts have the purpose not only to explain difficult words, but also to identify some plants used for medications or fumigations (the name of which was not immediately comprehensible), and interpret the rare logograms used by their predecessors. In some cases, commentators also tried to determine etymological or symbolic associations between the *materia medica* and the affliction that it should cure. In general commentaries were composed in an advanced

²⁹ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 58 (SpTU 1.47: rev. 1'–6'); Frahm 2011, 400.

³⁰ Clancier 2009.

³¹ Important to notice is that *āšipus* of the Šangu-Ninurta family have access to the archives belonging to the Uruk's temples; therefore, we can state that "Il ne faut donc pas rechercher dans les bibliothèques privées une tentative, de la part de leurs propriétaires, de tendre à l'exhaustivité. Au contraire, le profil des fonds que nous venons de commenter met en valeur l'aspect très spécialisé d'une grande partie des textes" (Clancier 2009, 90).

³² See Clancier 2009; Frahm 2011.

stage of the training: indeed, “writing such commentaries was the manner in which a student could fully demonstrate the extent of his knowledge”.³³

For instance, in reading some passages from SpTU 1.46 and its apparent commentary, we could see which points have been taken into account by an apprentice *āšipu* of the 5th century BCE in Uruk. The following example from the supposed original text describes the preparation of a medication useful to cure symptoms occurring in the mouth:

obv.

1. DIŠ NA EME-šú *eb-ṭe-et-ma*
KA-šú SI.A-at
2. PA^{GIŠ} ŠINIG PA^{GIŠ} ILDÁG PA^{GIŠ} GEŠTIN KA₅.A
3. ÚEME.UR.KU È GAZ SIM *ina*
A GAZI.SAR
4. ŠID-aš UGU EME-šú
Ì.NUN.NA ŠÉŠ
5. *ina* UGU EME-šú GAR-*ma ina-*
eš

obv.

1. If a man, his tongue is cramped and his mouth is full:
2. tamarisk leaves, leaves of the *adāru*-tree, leaves of the “fox-grape”-plant,
3. (and) dog’s tongue (= *cynoglossum*) you dry, crush, (and) sift, in the juice of the *kasû*-plant
4. knead it; anoint the upper part of his tongue with ghee,
5. (then) put (the mixture) on the upper part of his tongue, and he will recover.³⁴

About these five lines Anu-ikšur decided to consider just the verb *ebētu*. His analysis reads as follows:

1. DIŠ NA EME-šú *eb-ṭe-et-ma* :
e-bé-ṭu : *na-pa-ḫu*
2. *e-bé-ṭu* : *ra-bu-ú* (...)
1. “If a man, his tongue is cramped”: “to cramp” (means) “to swell”;
2. “to cramp” (means) “to get large” (...).³⁵

We may suppose that he focused his attention on this verb because its meaning was too obscure, or, on the contrary, because its meaning was too obvious; indeed, junior-*āšipus* like him usually avoided the difficult passages, concentrating rather on easier words or expressions, in order to learn how to do a text’s commentary.³⁶

Anu-ikšur proceeded with the explanation of a vague passage mentioning an undefined “*rābišû*-demon of the lavatory”, and also a clarification about the *lurpānu*-mineral. The part at issue of SpTU 1.46 and its relating commentary follow:

obv.

6. DIŠ NA IGI.MEŠ-šú GÚ-*su u*
NUNDUM-*su šim-mat* TU-
KU.MEŠ-*a*
7. *ù ki-ma* IZI *i-ḫa-am-ma-aṭ-šú*
8. NA BI MAŠKIM *mu-sa-a-ti*
DAB-*su ana* TI-šú
9. ^{NA}*mu-ša* ^{NA}AN.ZAḤ
^{NA}AN.ZAḤ.GI₆
10. ^{NA}KUR-*nu* DAB ^{NA}AN.BAR
^{NA}ZÁLAG *lu-ur-pa-ni*
11. *ši-i-pa* ^{IM}KAL.GUG
^{GIŠ}ŠE.N.ÚA

³³ Scurlock 2014, 337.

³⁴ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 57 (SpTU 1.46:1–5); Frahm 2011, 398. See also HeeBel 2010b, 59:1–5.

³⁵ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 57–58 (SpTU 1.47:1–2); Frahm 2010, 172; Frahm 2011, 398; Scurlock 2014, 338.

³⁶ See, for instance, Scurlock 2014, 337.

12. NAGA.SI *lu-lu-tú* DIŠ¹-*niš*¹
 SÚD *ina* ÚŠ^{GIŠ}EREN
 13. Ì.GIŠ *sér-di u* Ì.GIŠ
 BÁRA.GA HE.HE
 14. *še-ra* AN.BAR₇ *u* AN.USAN
 ŠÉŠ-*su*
 15. *ina* KUŠ GAG.GAG-*pí* *ina*
 GÚ-šú GAR-*an-ma* TI

obv.

6. If a man, his face, his neck, and his lips have continually paralysis,
 7. and burn him like fire,
 8. this man, the *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory has seized him. To save him:
 9. *mūšu*-stone, *anzahhu*-glass, black frit,
 10. magnetite, iron, *zalāqu*-stone, *lurpānu*-mineral,
 11. *šīpu*-paste, *kalgukku*-paste, chaste tree,
 12. salicornia, and *lulūtu*-mineral you shall pound together, (then) in cedar resin
 13. you shall mix it with olive oil and filtered oil,
 14. (and) you shall anoint him (with the mixture) in the morning, at noon, and in the evening.
 15. You shall wrap it in (a) leather (bag), put (the bag) around his nape, and he will recover.³⁷

2. (...) MAŠKIM *mu-sa-a-ti* : ^dšū-*lak*
 3. *a-na* É *mu-sa-a-tú* NU KU₄-*ub* : ^dšū-*lak* ŠĪG-*su*
 4. ^dšū-*lak* šá E-ú : ŠU : *qa-tum* : LA : *la-a* : KÙ : *el-lu*
 5. *ana* É *mu-sa-a-tú* KU₄-*ub* ŠU^{II}-*šú* NU KÙ *ana* UGU *qa-bi*
 6. *lu-ur-pa-ni ki-ma* ^{NA}ZA.GÌN-*ma* ZÁLAG *ta-kip šá-niš lu-ur-pa-ni* : IM.GÁ.LU

2. (...) “The *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory” (is) Šulak.
 3. “He should not go into the lavatory, (or) Šulak will hit him.”
 4. “Šulak”: (this is) what is said (about him): ŠU (means) “hand”, LA (means) “not”, KÙ (means) “clean”.
 5. (Then) he went into the toilet, (so) his hands are not clean. This is what is said about it.
 6. *Lurpānu*-mineral is like lapis lazuli, but spotted with bright spots; second: *lurpānu*-mineral is (like yellow) *kalû*-paste³⁸.

In this very interesting passage the commentator gives us an “example of creative philology”:³⁹ indeed, he tells us that the attack ascribed to the *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory is due to a lack of cleaning and explains it by dividing the demon’s name Šulak into syllables (Šu-la-ku) and assigning them the meanings of the corresponding Sumerian words (“Not clean hands”). Unluckily, we are not informed of the judgement that Anu-ikšur’s father/master gave to him about this commentary. It would be interesting to know how he evaluated it in order to understand if this interpretation was considered a mistake on the part of the *mašmaššu šeḫru* or not.

In the following lines from SpTU 1.46 there is a description of a stroke and of a remedy used to cure a patient affected by it, followed by the proper incantation:

- obv.
 16. DIŠ NA *mi-šit-tú pa-ni i-šú*
 IGI-šú *i-šap-par*

³⁷ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 57 (SpTU 1.46, 6–15); Frahm, 2011, 398–399. See also Heeßel 2010b, 59.

³⁸ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 58 (SpTU 1.47, 2–6); Frahm 2010, 172–173; Frahm 2011, 398–399; Scurlock 2014, 338–339.

³⁹ Frahm 2011, 232.

17. *ur-ra u mu-šá ur-ta¹(GA)-at-tú*
la it-ta-na-a-a-al

18. *ina LÁL u Ì.NUN.NA*

IGI.MEŠ-šú muš-uš-da

19. *[a] i-kal-li^úIN₆.ÚŠ ba-lu*

20. *pa-tan KÚ.KÚ-ma TI-ut*

rev.

21. *ÉN UL.ĦI.ŠI.IN MIN*

AN.NI.NÉ¹ (BI).ÉŠ QU.MA¹

(ŠU).A

22. *KI.ŠÈ NAM.GI.SI.SÁ MU.BI*

NA.AN.GI.SI.SI

23. *ĦU.UB.BÉ.EN LA*

ĦU.UB.BÉ.EN

24. *ĦU.BÉ.EN ĦU.UB.B.ÉEN :*

GI.SI.IR ŠU.U'.KUL.LU

25. *[TU].RA.AN.[NI]*

KU.UL.PA.NU

MU.UŠ.KA.TAB.BA

26. *KU.UK.KA.AD.DAL TU₆*

[NÉ]

27. *KA.INIM.MA šum-ma*

MAŠKIM KA LÚ ú-šab-[bit]

28. *DÙ.DÙ.BI SAĦAR SI-*

LA.LÍM.MA ana A PÚ ŠUB-ma

KA-šú LUĦ

29. *u ÉN im-ta-na-an-ni*

obv.

16. If a man has a paralysis affecting his face and he squints his eye

17. (if) day and night he stares, he cannot sleep,

18. (and) cannot stop rubbing his eyes with honey and ghee,

19. he shall eat the *maštakal*-plant on an

20. empty stomach, and he will recover.

rev.

21. Incantation: “ul-ĥi-ši-in min an-ni-né-éš qu-ma-a

22. ki-šè nam-gi-si-sá mu-bi na-an-gi-si-si

23. ĥu-ub-bé-en la ĥu-ub-bé-en

24. ĥu-bé-en ĥu-ub-bé-en : gi-si-ir šu-u'-kul-lu

25. *[tu]-ra-an-[ni] ku-ul-pa-nu mu-uš-ka-tab-ba*

26. *ku-uk-ka-ad-dal.*” Wording of [the incantation].

27. Recitation (to use) if a *rābišu*-demon has seized the mouth of a man.

28. Its ritual: You shall cast soil from a crossroads into well water, and he shall wash his mouth (with it)

29. and continually recite the incantation.⁴⁰

The part of the commentary which refers to this passage of the text analyses some difficult words, as for instance *mišittu* and *išap-par*, adding some information about the *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory; contrary to what one would expect, the obscure words of the incantation formula are not explained, probably, as already said, because junior students like Anu-ikšur usually “skipped over the difficult parts”,⁴¹ focusing on those passages that were easily comprehensible. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there are some passages that are not contained in the apparent original text, as the following lines show:

7. *mi-šit-tú : ma-šá-du : ma-ĥa-šu*
: mi-šit-tú : šá in-šu-ú

8. *šá-ṭar-šú im-ta-šid mi-šit-tú :*

IGI-šú i-šap-par : BAR : ša-pa-ru

9. *BAR : za-a-ru : ur-GA-at-tú la it-ta-na-a-al*

10. *ur-^{qa}GA¹-at-tú : bu-uš-qí-it-tú : muš-šu-da : muš-šu-‘u*

11. *áš-šú maš-maš-ú-tu ki-i qa-bu-ú : Ì.UDU^{šIM}GIG šá Ì.GIŠ ú-kal-lu*

12. *šIMGIG SÚD EN Ì.GIŠ È-a : Ì.UDU e-riš-ti : Ì.UDU ku-ri-tú*

⁴⁰ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 57 (SpTU 1.46, 16–29); Frahm 2011, 399. See also Heeßel 2010b, 59.

⁴¹ Scurlock 2014, 337.

13. *ina* KUŠ ÛZ *šip-ki* : *šip-ki* : *tu-up-pu* : MAŠKIM KA LÚ *uṣ-ṣab-b[i-it]*

14. MAŠKIM *pa-ni* ÛZ *šá-kin* : A PÚ *šáE-ú* : *ina* ŠÀ-šá MAKŠIM *mu-sa-a-[ti]*

15. ^d*šu-lak* : *lu-ú* ^d*šu-lak* *šá mu-sa-a-[ti]*

16. *ina* KUŠ *ši-pí* : *ina* KUŠ *ta-šap-pi* : *ši-p[i]...*

17. AL.ÚS.SA : *ši-iq* : *ta-ba-a-tú* [...]

7. “Paralysis” - “to strike” (means) “to hit”. “Paralysis” - He who has forgotten

8. what was decided for him⁴² has been struck by a paralysis. “He squints his eye” - “BAR” (means) “to squint”

9. (and) “BAR” (means) “to twist”. “*Ur-GA-at-tú*” (instead of *ur-ta-at-tú* = “he stares”) and cannot sleep”

10. - “*Urqattu*” (means) “vegetation”. “To rub” (means) “to massage”,

11. - so that *mašmaššūtu*, as one says. “Tallow of the *kanaktu*-tree, which contains oil”

12. - You pound the *kanaktu*-tree until the oil comes out. “The tallow of the *erištu*-plant” (means/is identical with?) “the tallow of the *kurītu*-plant”.

13. “In *šipku*-leather of a goat” - “*šipku*” (means) “submerged”. (Treatment to use for cases in which) “a *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory has seized a man’s mouth.”

14. (Goat’s leather is used because) a *rābišu*-demon has the face of a goat.⁴³ “Well water” - (this is)

what is said (about it): the *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory

15. is *Šulak* or *Šulak* of the lavatory.

16. “You shall ... (it) in leather” (means) “you shall wrap (it) in leather” - [...].

17. “AL.ÚS.SA” (means) “garum”, (which is equivalent to?) “vinegar” [...].⁴⁴

Interesting to note are the mistakes occurring in lines 9–10: first of all, Anu-ikṣur does not correct the wrong form *ur-GA-at-tú* written by his father/master in the original text, secondly he offers an illogical explanation, even off topic (“*Urqattu*” means “vegetation”). H. Hunger explains it with the following words:

Wie aus der Schreibung *ur-^{qa}GA-at-tú* hervorgeht, hat der Schreiber dieses Wort von der Wurzel *wrq* abgeleitet; auch die Erklärung *bušqittu* (für *wurqītu*, *urqītu*) kommt von dieser Wurzel. *Ur-GA-at-tú* hier und in Nr. 46,17 ist jedoch ein Schreibfehler für *ur-ta-at-tu*, wie aus den Duplikaten zu Nr. 46 hervorgeht.⁴⁵

Moreover, as already noticed above, lines 11–12 and line 17 are related to passages that are not quoted in the apparent original text; we may suppose that Anu-ikṣur was aware of some parallels to SpTU 1.46, as, for instance, the text published by F. Köcher as BAM VI 523 iii 3’–8’,⁴⁶ in which the passage quoted in lines 11–12 can also be found.⁴⁷ To follow, in lines 14–15 the *mašmaššu ṣeḥru* explains the reason why

⁴² For a different interpretation see Frahm 2011, 399.

⁴³ In other texts the *rābišu*-demon has lion features (see Edzard – Wiggermann 1987–1990, 455).

⁴⁴ The translation is provided by the author, and it is based on the transliteration of Hunger 1976, 58 (SpTU 1.47, 7–17); Frahm 2011, 399–400; Scurlock 2014, 339.

⁴⁵ Hunger 1976, 58, note to line 10.

⁴⁶ Köcher 1963–1980, BAM I–VI.

⁴⁷ See also Frahm 2011, 402, note to lines 11–13.

šipku-leather of a goat and well water must be used: Šulak has a goat-like face and, because he is the demon of the lavatory, he is associated with water.⁴⁸

This text should be considered the result of the efforts of a specialist active in the 5th century BCE to analyse and interpret a tablet composed by his father/master. It shows not only continuity in the study of therapeutic texts – which were the basis of this study –, but also interest in examining certain aspects relating to the medical profession. As we already noted, the commentary of SpTU 1.46 offers different types of explanations: in lines 1–2, for instance, Anu-ikšur suggests a clarification of the difficult word *ebētu* (that is to say, he presents a philological note), while in lines 2–5 and 14–15 he tries to explain the reason why the *rābišu*-demon of the lavatory is called Šulak, looking for a deeper meaning “through creative retranslation”.⁴⁹ In this etymological analysis he attempts to divide the demon’s name into syllables (Šu-la-ku) and translate them as if they were Sumerian words, i.e. literally “Not clean hands”: in so doing he explains the demon’s attack as a consequence of the lack of cleaning, and justifies the use of well water in the treatment. In other passages of the commentary Anu-ikšur gives information about some of the ingredients used to cure a man in case of paralysis or stroke, for example, as described in the apparent original text; for instance, in line 6 he describes the appearance of the *lurpānu*-mineral, comparing it with lapis lazuli and *kalû*-paste, but pointing out the presence of bright spots on it. These kinds of different explanations are very common in the Mesopotamian commentaries, especially of those written

during the Late Babylonian period. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out the lack of notes and comments about some difficult terms occurring in the base text, as for example the names of the ingredients in lines 11–12, or yet the obscure words used in the incantation formula in lines 21–26, probably, as already pointed out, because the commentator was still a *mašmašu šeḥru* and not a senior scholar.

Transmission and interpretation of the therapeutic texts: a conclusion

Commentaries as the one just presented in this case study represent efforts of scholars belonging to the late period of the Mesopotamian world to explain the works of Babylonian and Assyrian experts active some centuries before; they provide us with information about Mesopotamian language and civilization, in some cases allowing us to better understand the texts commented upon, and, perhaps more importantly, also the meaning assigned to them by scholars who studied these texts. In this sense, they could help us in analysing a text or a group of texts and in evaluating how experts of late periods interpreted it or them. In the case study presented here, however, the lack of documents does not allow us to have an adequate view of the situation. Indeed, archaeologists have found just some fragments of two tablets belonging to the abridged edition of UGU in the Šangu-Ninurta library, and not the series itself. Also, the only one commentary concerning the therapeutic texts is probably based on a tablet which is part of the UGU’s extract series and not of the original series. Furthermore, this commentary has been written by a junior-*āšipu* – as we already said, scholars at the beginning of their advanced training usually commented only on the easier passages written in the base text, avoiding the difficult parts. The

⁴⁸ See Frahm 2011, 403, note to lines 14 and 14–15.

⁴⁹ Scurlock 2014, 337.

impossibility of making a comparison with the different commentaries composed by senior professionals, for example, makes it difficult to understand how not only the extract series, but also the whole series *šumma amēlu muḥḥašu umma ukāl* have been interpreted by scholars active during the late period of the Mesopotamian world.

In any event, we could say that – despite the lack of documents – there was continuity in the interpretation and study of ancient therapeutic texts. The knowledge of symptoms and diseases, of medical treatments and recipes, of rituals and incantation formulas, has been transmitted from one generation of scholars to the following over the centuries. Already in the 7th century BCE we noticed the composition of the UGU series’ “new edition”; this means that specialists who lived during the Neo-Assyrian time gathered together a wide group of texts and re-elaborated on them. Two centuries later, there is another re-elaboration of these tablets – creating an extract series of them in order to render it more practical –, and a commentary on it. In any event, all these documents are the mirror – even if fragmentary – not only of the transmission of specific knowledge during the centuries, but also of the hard work of experts for the purpose of interpreting the texts of the tradition and of re-creating them in order to render them more useful.

Moreover, it is worth remarking that medical knowledge was transmitted among the members of one family. Indeed, we know that, after the first level of education, scribes could specialize in a profession that needed a particular preparation. This specialized education usually occurred inside families; indeed, the education system was mostly based on the transmission of knowledge (but

also of instruments such as texts collections) within the family sphere.⁵⁰ Often fathers and sons appear to practice an identical or related profession as the fruit of a specialization acquired and developed under the tutoring of a senior member of the family,⁵¹ as the colophon quoted above shows us. After all, this was a usual practice in the past. During the Persian Empire and the Hellenistic period, for instance, families of medicine’s professionals appear to have been active, just like in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. It is well known that at king Seleucus’ court there were two physicians, that is Cleombrotus and Erasistratus, father and son, respectively. Also in the Iliad the Greek poet Homer describes the medical services of Machaon and Podalirius, two brothers sons of Asclepius, the Medicine’s god.⁵² In this sense, Šangu-Ninurta and his descendants can be seen as the typical example of a family devoted to a particular profession (i.e. *āšipūtu*), to the transmission of specialized knowledge, and to the interpretation of ancient texts.

⁵⁰ See for example Cavigneaux 1982; Gesche 2001; Verderame 2008.

⁵¹ In most cases the master teaches to his son(s), but sometimes he can teach to students belonging to other families, usually of the same profession (see, for instance, Clancier 2009, 92).

⁵² See Nutton 2004.

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