

Entering the Netherworld

Niek Veldhuis
University of California, Berkeley

§1. The subject of the present paper is a new interpretation of RBC 2000 (originally published by Hallo 1985), which suggests that it may be a prayer for a dead person pleading to be admitted to the netherworld.

§2. RBC 2000 is written in a beautiful hand that points to the latter part of the third millennium. Paleography and orthography (in particular the use of the verbal infix –ši- rather than –še₃-) may date the tablet to around the time of Gudea. It should be noted, however, that the lack of comparable texts makes any more precise dating rather hazardous, so that an Ur III date is

certainly not excluded. As Hallo has pointed out, there is reason to believe that the text comes from the Lagaš area, in particular because of the appearance of the goddess Nanše in the final line. The lenticular format of the tablet is rather unusual and puzzling by itself, and we will come back to this issue later. The following edition is based upon a reading of McCormick's copy as published in Hallo's original edition. Collation from photographs, generously provided by Ulla Kasten, Babylonian Collection, Yale University Library, revealed the great reliability of that drawing.

§3. Edition and Translation

1	e ₂ -gal tir	May the palace
2	gu ₂ -ur ₅ ^{mušen} se ₁₂ -a a sig ḥa-mu-ši-ib ₂ -gar	provide clear water to me in the forest where <i>gur</i> birds live.
3	ša ₃ -bi gir ₄ maḥ izi ba-ra-a	Inside, where a great oven is lighted,
4	a sig ḥa-ma-ab-su ₃	may it sprinkle clear water for me.
5	ig-bi ra-gaba ḥ ^{ba} harran(KASKAL) <si>-sa ₂ -a-ga ₂ ḥa-gub	May its door, which is a courier, stand open when I finish my journey.
6	ze ₂ -ḥi-bi lu ₂ -kin-gi ₄ -a-kam	May its bolt, which is a messenger,
7	šu ḥa-mu-ši-nigin	turn around for me.
8	giš-bala-bi lam a ₂ sa ₆ -ga-mu ḥa-am ₃	May its crossbar be the Lama at my favorable side
9	za ₃ zi-da-ga ₂ ḥa-kar ₂ -kar ₂ -ka	that shines brightly on my right shoulder.
10	giš-ka ₂ -ba gu ₂ -bi ḥa-mu-da-zi	May its gate be proud because of me.
11	^d inanna igi-du-mu ḥe ₂ -am ₃	May Inanna be my vanguard.
12	dingir-mu a ₂ -dah ₃ -mu ḥa-am ₃	May my god be my helper,
13	egir-ga ₂ ḥa-gen	may he go behind me.
14	lu ₂ -i ₃ '-du-ga ₂ gu ₂ -e ki ḥa-la ₂	May my gatekeeper bow down,
15	ga ₂ gu ₂ -mu an-še ₃ ḥa-zi	so that I might raise my neck on high!
16	eš ₃ ^d en-ki ^d asar-re abzu-na	In the shrine of Enki, Asari in his Abzu
17	nam-mu-da-bur ₂ -e	will not be able to loose (this spell),
18	da-mu ^d nanše al-me-a	since Nanše is at my side.

Commentary

Passages discussed by Hallo are not repeated here.

§4. to line 2: The word $gu_2-ur_5^{mušen}$ is unorthographic for $buru_4(NU_{11}.BUR)^{mušen}$. The reading $buru_4$ is attested only in first millennium lexical texts; an Ur III text from Umma (*MVN* 21, 80)¹ and an Old Babylonian lexical text² indicate that the reading was /gur(u)/.³ The identity of this bird is a matter of debate. For Ur III and later the meaning “crow” seems reasonably assured. It has been argued, however, that in Ebla $buru_4^{mušen}$ means “raptor” or “vulture,”⁴ and there are indications that this meaning was known in Babylonia, too. In the late lexical tradition, $buru_4-gi^{mušen}$ corresponds to *nā'iru* (“roaring bird” *Ur₅-ra* 18; *MSL* 8/2. 151: 339), suggesting a bird of prey (this same translation is used for $te_8^{mušen-gu-la^{mušen}}$ in *Ur₅-ra* 18; *MSL* 8/2, 129: 193). The most telling third millennium reference is Urukagina 4 v 15-21 = 5 v 12-18 (see *FAOS* 5/1, 294-295) which refers to “wings of a $buru_4-gi$ -bird” to be delivered as tax by temple administrators (*sanga*). Here the translation “crow” is indeed very unlikely. Finally, in the Old Babylonian commentary text CBS 11319+ rev. i 12' (Sjöberg 1993) the word /numma/ is written with two $BURU_4$ signs on top of each other: $nu-um-ma = NU_{11}.BUR/NU_{11}.BUR^{mušen} = zību$ (“vulture”). This entry on the one hand reflects the well-known equivalence $nu-um-ma^{mušen} = zību$, while on the other hand preserving the memory of an older meaning of $buru_4^{mušen}$. Since the exact date of RBC 2000 remains uncertain, both possibilities (“crow,” or “raptor”) remain open.⁵

¹ N guruš u_4 1-še₃ // $gu-ur_2^{mušen}$ dal-la (“N men for one day, to chase away the gur birds”). Compare *SAT* 3, 1630: 1 guruš $buru_4^{mušen}$, Touzalin, *Aleppo* 241: 1 guruš ud 30-še₃ // $buru_4^{mušen}$ dal-še₃.

² Sjöberg 1993, 3 rev. i 11': $gu-ru = NU_{11}.BUR^{mušen} = he-re-ba-am$.

³ For the g/b alternation, see Civil 1973, 60.

⁴ See Fronzaroli 1996, 53 with note 6 and Sjöberg 1999, 540 with references to earlier literature.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of $buru_4^{mušen}$, see the catalogue of Sumerian bird names (Chapter 9) in my forthcoming *Religion, Literature, and Scholarship. The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds*.

The expression a sig means “clear water,” in opposition to a lu_3-a “muddy water;” see *PSD* A/1, 164.

The verbal form $ha-mu-ši-ib_2-gar$ implies an inanimate agent, presumably “the palace.” The prefix -ši- is understood here to have a first person referent (“to me;” see also line 7). The interpretation of the $ha-/he_2-$ forms in this text follows Civil forthcoming, who defines this prefix as a subjunctive-optative with deontic and epistemic functions.

§5. to line 5: The reading of the signs basically follows Hallo, who discusses the singular writing $ha_2harran(KASKAL)$. The expression $ig — gub$ (“to set a door open”) is constructed here with a locative just as in *ETCSL: Gilgames and Akka* 87: $gi_2ig-abul-la-ka sila-ba bi_2-in-gub$ “he put the door of the main gate in its street.”

§6. to lines 6-8: The technical terminology for parts of the door ($ze_2-hi-bi = sa_2hab_2$ and $gi_2š-bala$) is rather confusing here. In *ETCSL: Hymn to Nungal* 23, sa_2hab_2 is compared to a snake that slithers into a hole, which argues for the meaning “bolt.” The expression $šu — nigin$ (“to circle,” “to make a round trip”)⁶ implies a movement that comes back to its beginning. In this sense it is understandable for a messenger who comes back to his place of origin, but how this image applies to the bolt remains unclear to me.

§7. to line 10: “May the neck of its gate rise with me.” In my translation above, “because of me” renders the prefix -da-.

§8. to line 14: The text has $lu_2-KAK-du$. I assume that the intention is lu_2-i_3-du , for $lu_2-i_3-du_8$, “gatekeeper.”

§9. to lines 16-17: For this formula see Schramm 2001, 13-18.

Discussion

§10. In his edition Hallo suggested that this prayer was meant for someone’s release from “the big house,” which, according to Hallo, may be a colloquial word

⁶ See the discussion in Karahashi 2000, 164.

for prison. I would like to consider another option: the “palace” in this text may be “palace Ganzer,” the entrance to the netherworld. In that case, the request to open the doors is a request to be let in, rather than to be released. Several details of the text argue for such an interpretation.

§11. In *ETCSL: Inanna’s Descent*, her arrival at the netherworld is described as follows (73-75):⁷

^dinanna e₂-gal ganzer-še₃ um-ma-te
^{giš}ig kur-ra-ka šu hul ba-an-us₂
 abul kur-ra-ka gu₃ hul ba-an-de₂

*When Inanna arrived at the palace Ganzer,
 she pushed the door of the netherworld in anger,
 she shouted at the great gate of the netherworld in anger.*

§12. In the same composition Ereškigal instructs the doorkeeper how to let Inanna in (119-120):⁸

abul kur-ra imin-bi ^{giš}si-gar-bi he₂-ib-us₂
 e₂-gal ganzer dili-bi ^{giš}ig-bi šu ha-ba-an-us₂

*At each of the seven main gates of the netherworld the bolt
 should be applied,
 the doors of the palace Ganzer should be pushed open one
 by one.*

§13. “Palace Ganzer” is the entry to the netherworld and therefore closely associated with gates and doors – as in our text.⁹ The same association is found in *ETCSL: Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld* 166, where we find Gilgameš crying at the “gate of Ganzer, in front of the netherworld” (abul ganzer igi kur-ra-ka). The name of the palace is identical to a word for flame (ga-an-ze₍₂₎-er = *nablum*).¹⁰ Although the two words

are kept apart in spelling,¹¹ they are clearly identical in origin, reflecting the notion that the dead have to cross a fire in order to reach the netherworld. As far as I know this idea is nowhere explicitly formulated, except in the present text which speaks about a “great oven in which a fire is lighted.” It should be emphasized that the evidence does not allow an image of the netherworld as “hell.” The fire (or the oven) is something that one has to cross or go through, it is one more way to express the difficulty of accessing the realm of the dead, similar to a long journey, to crossing a river or to passing through seven gates. The oven and the forest (line 1) are images for the inhospitable terrain that the dead person has to cross. The scorching heat relates to the supplicant’s desire for water and to his or her request for being admitted to the “palace.” The journey itself is mentioned in line 5: “may the door, which is a rider, stand open when I finish my journey.”

§14. The gu₂-ur₅^{mušen} in line 2 of our text may call to attention the association between birds and spirits of the dead. All texts where this theme occurs, however, are first millennium in date;¹² no such association is known from earlier sources. If gu₂-ur₅^{mušen} means “crow” the image invoked may be that of a body being picked at by a crow. If the meaning “raptor,” or “vulture” is applicable here, the image becomes more poignant.

§15. The expression a sig or a si-ga (OB), “clear water,” is often used for libation water. At several places it indicates the water for the dead in the netherworld, as in the final lines of *ETCSL: Nintinugga’s Dog*:¹³

u₄ ti-la-ga₂ igi hu-mu-un-du₈
 u₄ ba-ug₇-en kur-ra a si-ga hu-mu-un-na₈-na₈

*May (Nintinugga) look after me while I live
 and when I die may she provide clear water in the
 netherworld.*

§16. In lines 8-13 the deceased, while entering the netherworld, asks for protection from all sides: the “crossbar (?)” on the side, Inanna in front, and his family god to the rear. This is followed by a pair of expressions that uses the opposition down – up: “May my

and Enki I116, but the context is unclear.

¹² See Maul 1995 and Katz 2003, 227-228.

¹³ Identical lines are found at the conclusion of *ETCSL: The Dedication of an Axe to Nergal*. See further PSD A/1 under a-si-ga and a-sig, and the discussion in Alster 1991, 88 commentary to line 167.

⁷ Repeated in 98-100.

⁸ Repeated in 125-126. For both passages, see most recently Katz 2003, 87-88.

⁹ For discussions of ganzer see Katz 2003, 85-91 and Horowitz 1998, 287-288, where further examples are quoted.

¹⁰ *MSL* 13, 36 A12 and B1; *MSL* 16, 20 24⁷. In context the word appears in *ETCSL: The Exploits of Ninurta* 569; *ETCSL: Nuska A D7*; and *ETCSL: Lament for Uruk E19*

¹¹ The word for flame is spelled NE.SIA (ganzer₂; lexical only) or ga-an-ze₍₂₎-er, whereas the entrance to the netherworld is written IGI.KUR.ZA (ganzer) or IGI.KUR (ganzer₃). The only exception may be *ETCSL: Inanna*

gatekeeper bow down, so that I might raise my neck on high!"¹⁴ The implication seems to be that there is a doorkeeper who is less than welcoming – again a reference to the difficulty of being admitted. In this context, Inanna's position at the vanguard is more than appropriate: she had experience in forcing her way into the netherworld. The appearance of Inanna in this context strongly suggests a conscious reference to the theme of Inanna's visit to the realm of the dead.

§17. Finally, one may speculate about the significance of the physical format of RBC 2000. Lenticular tablets were used for specific administrative purposes in the Ur III period and for school exercises in OB, but neither of these uses is relevant here. The round format was called *im-šu*¹⁵ "hand tablet," since it is easily held in the hand. It may be, then, that this tablet was given to the deceased person in the grave to be held by hand, to be consulted and recited on his or her journey to the netherworld.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alster, B.
1991 "Incantation to Utu," *ASJ* 13, pp. 27-96.
- Civil, M.
1973 "From Enki's Headaches to Phonology," *JNES* 32, pp. 57-61.
nd "Modal Prefixes," *ASJ* 22.
- ETCSL
The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literatur <<http://www-etcs.orient.ox.ac.uk>>
- Fronzaroli, P.
1996 "À propos de quelques mots éblaites d'orfèvrerie," in Ö. Tunca and D. Deheselle, eds., *Tablettes et images aux pays de Sumer et d'Akkad. Mélanges offerts à Monsieur H. Limet*, pp. 51-68, Liège: Université de Liège.
- Hallo, W. W.
1985 "Back to the Big House: Colloquial Sumerian Continued," *OrNS* 54, pp. 56-64.
- Horowitz, W.
1998 *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, MC. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns.
- Karahashi, F.
2000 *Sumerian Compound Verbs with Body-Part Terms*, Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago.
- Katz, D.
2003 *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, Bethesda, Maryland: CDL.
- Maul, S. M.
1995 "Totengeist und Vögel. Eine Vogelliste aus dem neubabylonischen Grab 433 in Uruk," in R. M. Boehmer, F. Pedde and B. Salje, eds., *Uruk: Die Gräber (=AUWE 10)*, pp. 218-20, Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern.
- Robson, E.
1999 *Mesopotamian Mathematics, 2100-1600 BC. Technical Constants in Bureaucracy and Education (=OECT 14)*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Schramm, W.
2001 *Bann, Bann! Eine sumerisch-akkadische Beschwörungserie (=GAAL 2)*, Göttingen: Seminar für Keilschriftforschung der Universität Göttingen.
- Sjöberg, Å. W.
1993 "CBS 11319+. An Old-Babylonian Schooltext from Nippur," *ZA* 83, pp. 1-21.
1999 "Notes on Selected Entries from the Ebla Vocabulary eš₃-bar-kin₅ (II)," in B. Böck, E. Cancik-Kirschbaum and T. Richter, eds., *Munuscula Mesopotamica. Festschrift für Johannes Renger (=AOAT 267)*, pp. 513-52, Münster: Ugarit Verlag.
- Tinney, S.
1996 *The Nippur Lament. Royal Rhetoric and Divine Legitimation in the Reign of Išme-Dagan of Isin (1953-1935 B.C.) (=OPSNKF 16)*, Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Museum.

¹⁴ For this passage see Tinney 1996, 175.

¹⁵ See most recently Robson 1999, 176 with earlier literature.