

AN INTERPRETATION OF KUB XXIII 79
 (“THE SACRIFICE ON THE RIVER MALA”)

by ANNA MARIA POLVANI

This text has been known for a long time¹ and was recently analysed by Arikan, who held that the “ancient tablets”, which are referred to in the second prayer for the plague of Muršili II, are indeed the text KUB XXIII 79².

It is a very fragmentary document, but noteworthy in many aspects. Even if the lacunosity of the text makes my interpretation nothing but a conjecture, I think it is worth putting forward some reflections stimulated by reading the text.

KUB XXIII 79

Obv.

1	n]u ka-ru-ú-i-le-eš DINGIR ^{mes} -eš
2]x tar-ma-ir ÍD ^{mes} -ma ħu-ma-an-du-uš tar-nir
3]tar-ni-ir nu KUR ^{hi.a} -aš ÍD ^{mes} -TIM A-NA ^d Ma-a-la
4	ħi-i]n-ku-u-wa-ar-ra-az da-a-ir
5]x-it nu KUR-e par-ku-nu-e-ir
6	ħa-a]t-tal-wa-ir
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7]KUR.KUR ^{hi.a} x[]e-ša-at nu ^d UTU-wa-aš DUMU.NITA-an
8	[ħu-u-]ma-an-te-eš DINGIR ^{mes} e-ep-pir n[a]-a[n KU]R-an-ti LUGAL-un i-e-ir
9	[m]a-a-an MU.100+62.KAM ^{hi.a} x-x[^d ?]U?-ni šu-ul-li-[e-ir(?)
10	[x x]-ya-az IŠ-TU GU ₄ ^{hi.a} UDU ^{hi.a} UR[.GI ₇ ^{hi.a} (?)
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11	[nu D]UMU.LÚ.U ₁₉ .LU ma-a-an ki-i-ša-ti nu [
12]eš tar-ħu-e-ir na-aš-ta KUR-e an-da[
13]ya-ša-aš-ša-an ħi-in-kán ú-i-[ya-at ?/-it
14]x MU.4.KAM nu-wa ka-a-aš LUGAL-uš[
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15	^d UT]U?-aš at-ta-aš-ši[
16]pa-id-du ÍD[
17]x KUR-ya-aš[
18	ħ]a-aš-šu-u[š ħanzaššuš

¹ Published in transcription by E. Laroche, RHA 77 (1965), 115-117.

² Y. Arikan, The Mala River and its importance according to Hittite documents, in A. Archi – R. Francia eds., VI Congresso Internazionale di Ittitologia Roma 5-9 September 2005, Part I, Roma 2007 (SMEA 49), 45.

19 k]ar? [
20]x[

Rev.

1' [x-x-a]d ?-du z[a-?
2' [nu] iš-ša-an
3' [x x]-ta-an-ni-ma
4' [nu h]a-at-ra-iz-z[i

5']^{mes} wa-aḥ-nu-z[i
6']-i nu ŠA UD.1.KAM K[ASKAL (?)
7' [a-ap]-pa-ma-at-za KUR-e-aš-ša[
8' [^{id}]Ma-a-la-an QA-TAM-MA h[a-
9' [me-n]a-aḥ-ḥa-an-da-aš-ma-aš Ú[-UL ku-i]t?-ki ti-i-e?[-ez-zi]

10' [ŠA] ^{id}Ma-a-la SISKUR.SISKUR [ma-a-a]n KUR-ya an-da ḥi-in-ká[n]
11' [ki]-i-ša nu ki-i [S]ISKUR.SISKUR [IŠ-TU] DINGIR^{him} ar-ḥa a-ri-ya-an-zi
12' [na-]at ma-a-an []ḥa-an-da-it-ta-ri nu LUGAL MUNUS.LUGAL
13'] x x []-ya-az-zi-ya KUR-ya-az-zi-ya an-
tu-uh-š[e?-eš]
14' -z]I na-aš-ta ki-i SISKUR.SISKUR
15']x i-en-zi QA-TI

Obv.

1] and the ancient gods
2] . fixed/nailed/tied and all the rivers
let go/abandoned
3]let go/abandoned and to/of the countries the
rivers toward the river Mala (=Euphrates)
4 a tri]bute/a gift/an offering by itself took
5] . and purified/cleaned the country
6 they cl]osed/barred

7] the countries . [] he sat and the young son of the Sungod
8 [al]] the gods took and made [him] king for [the coun]try
9 [wh]en 162 years ..[for the Storm go[d (?) conte]nded ?
10 [] . . with/ from oxen, sheep, do[gs (?)

11 [and hu]manity when it was made/became then [
12 [] . they won, then in the country [
13 [] . . . the pestilence se[nt / arri]ved
14 [] . the fourth year still this king

15 the Sun]god his father[
16] go the river[

Aside from the supposition of alluding to a flood, we should point out that the passage in question is not at all clear. Furthermore, the two verbs *tarmair* (obv. 2) and *hattalwair* (obv. 6) pose a problem in interpreting this passage and do not exclude other possible explanations.

The first few lines, in my opinion, are the part of a myth that is “cosmogonic/etiological” in nature, the description of a distant time, a starting point when the “ancient gods” took care of the regime of the waters and “channelled”⁶ the rivers in the country, i.e. the numerous tributaries flowing into the Euphrates. Hence, after having taken for themselves offerings or gifts and having “cleaned or purified” the country, they provided for the building of “barriers” (or perhaps dams?). It could therefore be the description of a primordial arrangement of the world. We know that the Euphrates (and also the Tigris) is often present in the Mesopotamian myths of cosmogonic nature, and, in particular, a similar interpretation of the text brings to mind, for instance, the introductory part of the text in Sumerian: “A Debate between the bird and the fish”⁷. And, as Vanstiphout⁸ underlined in the case of the Sumerian text, it might not be the description of a general cosmogonic system, but rather an adaptation to the particular situation required by the context.

Further to this introduction echoing mythical themes of Mesopotamian literature, follows the entry of an episode centred on the theme of the Kingship in Heaven. In this case, as in the myth of the LAMMA kingship, they are the same gods that put one of them on the throne – in this case the young son of the Sun god – and during this reign a dispute occurs (perhaps between the different generations of gods) for the Storm god. The cosmogonic nature of the account is confirmed by the introduction, at this point, of the creation of humanity, a creation described concisely (*kišati*), even though it is still difficult to understand the preceding mention of “oxen, sheep, do[gs (?)”⁹. One group (we do not know which one) of the deities in conflict has the upper hand, and, consequently, an epidemic (*hinkan*) is sent clearly intent on destroying humanity¹⁰.

⁶ Y. Arikan, *op. cit.*, 45 translates “(all) the rivers in the country (merge) with Mala River”; See Haas, *op. cit.* in nota 3, 147 “alle Flüsse losließen”.

⁷ For the text and bibliography see. <http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/>: “1-12. In those ancient days, when the good destinies had been decreed, and after An and Enlil had set up the divine rules of Heaven and earth, then the third of them,....., the lord of broad wisdom, Enki, the master of destinies, gathered together.....and founded dwelling places; he took in his hand waters to encourage and create good seed; he laid out side by side the Tigris and the Euphrates, and caused them to bring water from the mountains; he scoured out the smaller streams, and positioned the other watercourses..... Enki made spacious sheepfolds and cattle-pens and provided shepherds and herdsmen; he founded cities and settlements throughout the earth, and made the black-headed multiply: He provided them with a king as shepherd, elevating him to sovereignty over them; the king rose as the daylight over foreign countries”.

⁸ H.L.J. Vanstiphout, *The Mesopotamian Debate Poems. A General Presentation (Part I)*, *Acta Sumerologica* 12 (1990), 289 ss

⁹ Alluded perhaps to the creation also of the animal world?

¹⁰ According to Haas, l.c., the pestilence arrives during the fourth reigning year for the weakness of the Sungod's son.

The reason for the annihilation of humanity is well-known in Mesopotamian literature. It is sufficient to think of the myth of Atrahāsīs, known also by the Hittites¹¹, and the myth is also present in the mythological Hittite texts, as in the myth of Hedammu in which, as is known, the god Ea is asked why Kumarbi wants to destroy humanity¹².

It is more difficult to understand the rest of the Rev. 9'- 17' perhaps alludes to a preceding dialogue (also the verb *paiddu* in obv.16).

If this interpretation of the text is admissible, the conclusions are not of little interest. In fact it follows that:

1) The ritual is connected to the mythical account, not on the strength of a hypothetically flooding of the river Euphrates, but as a reminder of the epidemic (which perhaps happened during the reign of the young son of the Sun god) and the will of the gods to annihilate humanity. The recourse to the "ritual of the river Mala" may be better explained if we think, instead, of a famine due to drought, when evocation of the great Euphrates river was plausible. It must not be forgotten that with the Hittites there was also a festival dedicated to the river Mala, mentioned in the extensive annals of Muršili II¹³.

2) The mythical account gives, once again, a free re-elaboration of mythical themes of Anatolian and Mesopotamian origin (Hurrian and Hittite).

3) We would have a description that is cosmogonic/etiological in nature, which is very rare in religious Hittite literature¹⁴.

4) The right linking, underlined by Haas, with the myth of the Kurunta Kingship strengthens (in my view) the presumption put forward by me of a much stricter "mythological nucleus" connected to the theme of "succession" to the divine throne (the real Theomachy) constituted by the myth of Kumarbi, the LAMMA kingship and the myth of the god Eltara¹⁵.

5) *Above all*, we have clear proof of the use of an episode of the cycle of the Kingship in Heaven in a ritual. In other words, its functional utilization in the cult.

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¹¹ A.M. Polvani, Hittite Fragments on Atrahāsīs Myth in: AA.VV., *Semitic and Assyriological Studies presented to Pelio Fronzaroli*, Wiesbaden, 2003, 532-539.

¹² See J. Siegelová, *Appu-Märchen und Hedammu-Mythus*, Wiesbaden, 1971 (StBoT 14), 46.

¹³ See Y. Arikian, op. cit., 47.

¹⁴ See G. Beckman, RJA, s.v. Mythologie.A. II, 571.

¹⁵ A.M. Polvani, The god Eltara and the Theogony, in A. Archi – R. Francia edd., VI Congresso Internazionale di Ittitologia, Rome 5-9 September 2005, Part II, Rome 2008 (SMEA 49), 617- 624. For a contrary opinion see A. Archi, Orality, Direct Speech and the Kumarbi Cycle, AoF 36 (2009), 2, 209-229.