

A NOTE ON AN OVERLOOKED WORD-PLAY IN THE
AKKADIAN GILGAMESH *

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I. BALLS AND STICKS IN GILGAMESH

The observation of a possible word-play between *ḥaššinnu* "axe" in Gilgamesh's dream of the coming of Enkidu and the word *assinnu* "male prostitute", "Buhlknabe" (etc.), led the present writer to a line of thinking that reverses the trend to reject the notion that there was a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. It is hoped that the discussion that follows will confirm the pun *ḥaššinnu: assinnu*, will uncover a second closely related pun in the same dream sequence, and will throw light on the meaning and import of the *pukku* and *mekku* as symbolic sporting equipment.

1) *ḥaššinnu: assinnu*

A Berkeley graduate student, Ms. Turan Tuman, in a 1977 class dealing with the Gilgamesh Epic, questioned the rationale of an "axe" in the dream of Gilgamesh and suggested that a pun on the word *assinnu* was intended. This suggestion would appear to be valid and has borne several fruits that support and embellish it. [P. Michalowski informs me that he has an article in preparation dealing with the axe in Gilgamesh as a castration symbol.]

2) *kišru: kezru*

Since the axe of which Gilgamesh dreams belongs to the second part of his dream, the obvious place to seek evidence for any special puns or innuendo is the first part of the dream announcing or portraying the coming of Enkidu (Tab. I v 28). There, the first object to fall from the sky is a *kišru* "ball," ("circle, knot, cluster" etc., now generally translated and understood as a "meteorite" for this passage) to which object Gilgamesh makes love, in his dream, as though it were a woman, and as he does subsequently to the "axe". It is highly probable, therefore, that the underlying pun is with the word *kezru* "male with curled (i.e. dressed) hair", the male counterpart as "prostitute", "Buhlknabe", etc. of *kezertu* "female prostitute".

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The implication of the double pun is, of course, that the often suspected, much discussed but of late rejected sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is, after all, the correct interpretation.

3) *pukku* and *mekku*, "ball and stick"

A further result of the observation of word-plays about ball: male lover and axe (i.e. stick plus blade): male-lover is that there must be a connection with the game equipment that figures so prominently in the opening of the epic (Tab. I ii, II iv; contra AHW, s.v. *puqu*) and which is a main element of the concluding tablet (XII) of the canonical version, about which we know more details from "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" (lines 149-234), the Sumerian tale that is the exact counterpart of the twelfth tablet of the epic.

The following remarks are offered about the meaning and symbolism of the *pukku* and the *mekku*, *kişru:kezru* and *haşşinnu:assinnu* within the Epic of Gilgamesh:

a) Gilgamesh's large size and his strength are implied by the description of him as "two-thirds god" (I ii 1) and other lines like "(strong) like the wild ox" (I ii 8) as well as the broader context in which he always prevails over the stalwarts of Uruk in the (bloody?) *pukku* and *mekku* game and about which they all complain (tab. I and "Gilg., Enkidu and the Netherworld"). Tab. I ii 2 which begins with "the form of his body..." probably contained some reference to his large size. Specific references to his large proportions are to be found in the Hittite fragment KUB VIII 57 (see Laroche, *Catalogue*, pp. 58 f., and in RHA 82, pp. 7 f.) where he is said to be eleven cubits tall, where his chest measures nine *wakšur* across, and his X (read *harniu*- "penis" or *miniu* = ?) is three [x] in length. (I thank R. Stefanini for reminding me of this text.)

b) Just exactly what else Gilgamesh did to oppress the men and women, girls and boys of Uruk remains unclear, though some sort of sexual harassment is indicated. It should be obvious, in any event, that Enkidu is created specifically to be Gilgamesh's match in girth, largeness of members, strength, and sexual appetite.

c) Enkidu's large size is implied in a Sultantepe text, the unique "Letter of Gilgamesh" (see Gurney, *AnSt* 7 (1957), pp. 127-136) in which Gilgamesh requests enormous numbers of precious stones and gold to be used for a made-to-order breast ornament for Enkidu.

d) A conclusion can be drawn that the rough sport of *pukku* and *mekku*, using a large, solid wood ball (following Landsberger, *WZKM* 57 (1961), p. 23) and a long wood stick (like a hockey stick or type of mallet, having the same general shape as a long-handled axe with blade) was one, if not the prominent game

played in connection with weddings (note the stick games played by men in the Near East today at weddings), hence the pertinence of the nuptial celebrations in (OB) Tab. II iv-v, whether it was Gilgamesh's wedding (following Landsberger) or another Urukian's; moreover, the ball and stick game appear to symbolize the insatiable energy and sexual appetite of Gilgamesh. That is, just as he is deprived of this game (and its rewards) because the ball and stick fall into a hole in the playing field and into the Netherworld ("Gilg., Enkidu and the Netherworld", line 164), this favorite(?) recreation is replaced by the personified Mr. Ball and Stick himself, namely Enkidu whose coming was already announced as a large ball (*kisru*) and axe/stick (*ḥaššinnu*).

e) There are other hints in the text beyond the *assinnu/kezru* puns that may or may not indicate that Gilgamesh and Enkidu enjoyed a loving sexual relationship (or, as Jacobsen puts it in his *Treasures of Darkness* (1976), p. 218, "the relationship ... competes with, and replaces, marriage"):

E's hair is like a woman's (I ii 36);

G makes love to E's symbols (I v 36, vi 4, 14, 19; cf. VIII ii 4-6);

G rejects Ishtar's advances/E's anger (Tab. VI);

G, like a widow, mourns E (Tab. VIII ii 3);

G veils his dead friend like a bride (Tab. VIII ii 17);

G rejects the alewife's suggestion for marriage, implying that E was wife (following Jacobsen; Tab. X, frag. BM 96974, see Millard, *Iraq* 26 (1964), p. 100, lines 3'-6');

[E as *lullu(-amēlu)*: pun on *lalū/lullū?*].

II. THE ROLE OF TABLET XII AS CONCLUSION TO THE EPIC

The observations discussed above may enable us to understand the reasoning behind the addition of Tab. XII (essentially a translation from the second part of the Sumerian tale "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld") to the Akkadian version. As the *pukku* and *mekku* disappear into the Netherworld, so does Enkidu who went to fetch them up for Gilgamesh but who, ignoring Gilgamesh's advice and thereby sealing his fate, remained in the land of the dead. Tab. I col. i opens with the words *ša nagba imuru*, "he who saw the depths", referring to Gilgamesh, while col. ii introduces the important, symbolic, *pukku* and *mekku*. The redactor of the canonical version has pulled together the preceding eleven tablets by adding the *pukku/mekku* story, Tab. XII, as a kind of inclusio: the *pukku* and the *mekku* together with their human counterpart, Enkidu, having played out their roles in the developing character of Gilgamesh, descend into the Netherworld. The hole that is opened up (by Nergal at the command of Ea who took pity on Gilgamesh) is the very hole through which Gilgamesh is able to see the depths, i.e. of the

Netherworld, as no live person had ever done. Thus, Tab. XII is not an "inorganic appendage" (Speiser, ANET¹ p. 97), or a "mechanical addition... which has no organic connection with the rest of the epic" (Jacobsen, *Treasures* (1976), p. 215), but is rather, a dramatic capstone whereby the twelve-tablet epic ends on one and the same theme, that of "seeing" (= understanding, discovery, etc.), with which it began. (cf. Alster, 1974, 55f.).

The real "conclusion" of the Epic might better be seen as starting at the end of Tab. XI with the four-lines about the walls of Uruk (Tab. XI, 305-308) which take us immediately back to the almost identical lines at the beginning of Tab. I (lines 15-18). While Tab. XI, the Flood Story, fills out the required prediction of Tab. I's opening lines, "he brought a report from before the flood", Tab. XII satisfies the requirement of the prior lines "he saw the depths". Thus, the two astounding accomplishments that are credited to Gilgamesh—that he saw the Netherworld and that he brought news from before The Flood—are given a tablet each at the end of the epic, in reverse order, so that we end where we began.

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