

RBC 2000 — OUT OF PRISON, INTO THE NETHERWORLD OR, PERHAPS,
A LOVE CHARM?

DINA KATZ (LEIDEN)

Niek Veldhuis drew my attention to his recent paper, in which he offers a new interpretation to RBC 2000 (CDLB 2003:006)¹. The text was previously published by W. Hallo (“Back to the Big House” *OrNS* 54 (1985) 56-64). RBC 2000 is a lenticular tablet, perhaps from Lagaš, dating to the Ur III period or even earlier, and inscribed with a rare literary text². Hallo suggested that it is an individual prayer for a release from the “big house” — presumably a prison. Veldhuis now proposes that it may be “a prayer for a dead person pleading to be admitted to the netherworld”. My primary concern is not the literal translation but its meaning. Thus, my response to Veldhuis is based on these two editions, with no further lexical treatment. In general I follow Hallo’s translation and integrate the contributions of Veldhuis.

At face value the discussion of Veldhuis seems convincing. However, a close reading reveals some major difficulties. First is the very issue: all human beings end up in the netherworld whether they plead or not, therefore this possibility seems unlikely. Yet, one does plead with the gods for decent existence in the netherworld, but in that case why would he appeal to Inanna? As we learn from “Inanna’s descent” she has no power in the netherworld. During her entrance she lost all her ‘me’ and was not even able to save herself. Inanna plays more important roles in the world of the living, particularly in the context of love making. He who wants a better afterlife would appeal to a netherworld god. An additional problem is the assertion that the interior of the é-gal is a lit oven (l.3). The image of a burning hell is well rooted in Christian theology, not in Sumerian. The oven is an indicator of human civilization, it stands for baked bread, cooked meat and the production of implements³, therefore it is diametrically opposed to the primordial, uncivilized realm of the dead. Rather than an “inhospitable terrain”, the image of a lit oven creates a sense of home⁴, which is out of place in the netherworld as well as in a prison. Also tir — “forest” would be a rather unusual description of the netherworld. To the best of my knowledge, the barren place where nothing grows and where nothing was produced has never been portrayed as a forest, actual or metaphorical. All the more so as the habitat of birds, in the translation of Veldhuis: “May the big house provide

¹ http://cdli.ucla.edu/pubs/cdlb/2003/cdlb2003_006. Niek Veldhuis kindly agreed to a published reaction. The natural place of the response would have been the next issue of CDLB, but for personal reasons I prefer the traditional mode. Abbreviations follow *PSD* and *CAD*. I am indebted to Bendt Alster for reading the manuscript and making valuable suggestions.

² For discussion of the provenance and the date see the editions of Hallo and Veldhuis.

³ For instance in cosmogonic introductions see Lahar and Ašnan:21, and especially Gilgameš Enkidu and the Netherworld:7. See also The marriage of Martu:136 for the characteristics of the uncivilized nomads (in the Oxford Electronic Texts Collection of Sumerian Literature, with bibliography).

⁴ Compare: SP coll. 2.29 and *UET* 6/2 277, in Alster 1997:51 and 313 (resp.).

clear water to me in the forest where *gur* birds live." Other images may pertain to the netherworld, however they also describe different settings. For example *é-gal* (l. 1) in SP coll. 6 B 6.1-6.6 and SP coll. 11.56⁵ present no less than seven images, of which none is "netherworld" and only one probably alludes to a prison. The mention of a gatekeeper, if *lú-i-du₈* was indeed intended by *lú-KAK.DU*, is not exclusive to the netherworld. The dead were indeed provided with water, which, however, would have been expressed with the verbs *dé*, *bal* or *naĝ*: "pour", "libate" and "drink" (resp.) rather than *sud* — "sprinkle".

As yet, the text has no duplicates and parallels, except for line 1 which is attested as the first line of SP coll. 6.3. It is structured as couplets of one or two lines, composed of a statement followed by a wish clause⁶. Apart from the first statement "the palace is a forest", all the statements relate to parts of the building: "Its (-bi) ... is ...", comparing them to various unrelated matters⁷. The variety of compared objects and adjectives implies that we deal with figurative language. This may mean that the parts of the building are not necessarily actual but metaphors. Hallo concluded that the language is colloquial, and therefore, probably a personal text. Following his conclusions I would like to suggest with due caution yet another interpretation. I am well aware that the suggested interpretation is rather speculative, since the phrasing of the text is unique. However, in the proposed context some of these images are universal.

My initial question is what unites the different images to serve one objective: what is a palace which is a forest, that it needs to be wet, that its inside is a warm oven, and that the supplicant wishes to enter it. And why, in addition to help from his personal god, he invokes Inanna to be his vanguard. The most problematic image is that of the lit oven (l. 3)⁸. I could not find any parallel to this image in Sumerian literature. However, in Old Babylonian Akkadian texts we find the opposite expression: *kinūnu belū*, "extinguished oven". In these texts this expression signifies the lack of offspring⁹. One possible explanation to the connection made between an oven and having children is that the "oven" was figurative language for womb. Therefore, maybe the lit oven that forms the interior of a palace is an image of a warm womb. In view of the appeal to Inanna to be a vanguard, perhaps this text describes in colloquial figurative language, and somewhat plain images, the act of love making; a personal love charm or, perhaps, a spell concerning impotency.

1-2. *é-gal tir*. The phrase "the palace is a forest" is attested as l. 1 of SP coll. 6.3. The context, however, is different. Therefore, on the basis of one common phrase we have no grounds to conclude that comparable to SP coll. 6.3 (which mentions Nungal) the spell points to a prison. In SP coll. 6.6, for instance, the palace is related with motherhood. Following the

⁵ Alster 1997:146-148. Note that Niek Veldhuis has now shown that there is no SP coll. 6! It is — as had been predicted by Gordon and Alster — the continuation of SP coll. 2. See *JAOS* 120 (2000):389. Further references to SP coll. 6, however, remain according to the published edition of Alster.

⁶ In his translation Veldhuis combined the two members of each couplet into one wish clause. Therefore, I prefer Hallo's translation that preserves the original pattern in couplets.

⁷ The structure of the statements is reminiscent of a riddle i.e. R.D. Biggs, Pre-Sargonic Riddles from Lagash, *JNES* 32 (1973) 26-33. In content the enumerated sequence of parts of the building has been suggested for the Nungal hymn (AfO 24 [1974]: 19-46). Now, that an Ur III date was suggested for the Nungal hymn (Flückiger-Hawker 1999:15), it is not impossible that on the verbal level the spell is dependent on the hymn. The similarity does not prove that the texts are thematically related. Perhaps the skilled scribe used the literary materials of the Hymn for the purpose of the spell.

⁸ That the interior is a lit oven, therefore, a warm oven is my main difficulty with Hallo's interpretation of the "big house" as a prison.

⁹ *CAD* K, 395^a 1b-4'; Bayliss 1973:120.

interpretation in line 3 of *gir₄-maĝ* "oven", "kiln" as figurative language for womb I would suggest an interpretation of *é-gal* as a metaphor of the vulva, and correspondingly *tir* as the pubic hair. Note that in the much discussed love song DI D Dumuzi beseeches "let me go to the palace" (l. 20). All the contributors to this text rendered *é-gal* literally, but perhaps this line also carries a second, metaphorical meaning, concerning the wish of Dumuzi to make love to Inanna¹⁰. If so, *é-gal* would describe the sexual charm of Inanna. *tir* has no parallel as a metaphor for pubic hair, however other plants are quite prevalent metaphors for male and female organs. Especially compare DI E and ŠS C¹¹.

gú-ĥar/ur₃-mušen-sa₇-a remained problematic in both editions. The entries *gud.sa₇^{sa}.a = ba-nu-ú* in Hh XIII:308 and *šaĥ.sa₇.a = ba-nu-ú* in Hh XIV:169 suggest that it is a bird's name, as Veldhuis proposed, rather than a "bird-trap" which Hallo rendered¹². I would suggest to read *sa₇.a = banû* "well formed", and consequently the "well formed *gur*-bird" is the subject of the wish clause.

a-sig ĥa-mu-ši-ib-ġar: *a-sig* is the object of the verb *ġar*, signifying "saturate with water"¹³ and the agent of the verb is the *gur*-bird. Veldhuis translated lines 1-2: "May the big house provide clear water to me in the forest where *gur* birds live". I propose to render line 2 "May the well-formed *gur* bird saturate it (the forest) with water". Assuming that *é-gal tir* describes the vulva, and in view of the bird's function to water it, perhaps the bird is a metaphor for the male organ. A possible metaphor of penis as "bird" may be in SP coll. 21 line 10: "The Fowler and his Wife". An image of "well-watered" vulva (not literally parallel) is Šusin C lines 1-2 and DI E line 1, and compare also DI P ii:24-26¹⁴. Therefore, perhaps in 'a'—"water" there is a pun on 'a' — "semen".

3-4. The translation "Inside, where a great oven is lighted, may it sprinkle clear water for me" is inconsistent with the pattern of a statement followed by a wish clause, and detached from the previous couplet although the Sumerian phrasing links them by means of the possessive pron. *-bi/*. Presumably these lines complement ll. 1-2. Line 3, which Hallo translated: "Its interior is a great oven whose fire is lit" seems to expand l. 1 with "Its" as a link to the palace. A lit oven is a basic tool for the creation of new objects and a symbol of homeliness and family life, therefore it is a reasonable candidate for a metaphor of a womb. In modern colloquial Hebrew and English oven is sometimes used to signify womb, particularly during pregnancy ("she has a bun in the oven").

Hallo's translation of l. 4: "may the A.SIG keep it far from me" suits his suggestion that *é-gal* is a prison, but carries on the problem in line 2 (see note 12 above). If *a-sig* has to be connected with water then it is not the subject of the wish clause, the verb *sud* is not "be far

¹⁰ Ms. C, however, has *é-me-šè*. See Sefati 1998:151-164, with previous bibliography. Note that l. 19, where Dumuzi asked to be released, is also attested in a lament and ritual for the young dying god Ašgi. In the latter text he refers to his soul, asking his sister to release his soul from the dead body before it is buried, see Katz 2003:205 line 41.

¹¹ Jacobsen 1987:93; Sefati 1998: 165ff. and 360 ff. (resp.). Note especially the commentary in p. 167 with references to other opinions. See also discussion in Assente 2002:40-41, with fig. 9 and fn. 62.

¹² "Trap" suits indeed the image of a prison but the translation appears rather strange. Moreover, since Hallo left A.SIG untranslated but took it as the subject, and he did not recognize a bird's name in the line, the problem would re-emerge in l. 4 where A.SIG is mentioned again.

¹³ See Klein 1990:117 ad 25-26; *PSD* A/I, 164-165. Compare Sefati 1998, 220-21 for his translation of DI P ii:24-28.

¹⁴ Text: Sefati 1998:361-3, 165-7 and 218ff (resp.); translation: Jacobsen 1987:93.

away", and one reason in favour of prison is removed. l. 4 seems to expand l. 2: a-sig is repeated, again as direct object, here of the verb sud. The connection of this couplet to the preceding suggests that the agent is once more the bird. In this context the most suitable meaning of sud is "sprinkle" as Veldhuis rendered: "May it (the bird) sprinkle clear water for me". However, the verb sud — "sprinkle" is not used to describe water libation for the dead, and therefore l. 4 does not support his proposition that the text deals with a journey to the netherworld. Following the above suggested interpretation, it is not impossible that a-sig has a double meaning: "semen" in addition to "water". Compare the Akkadian ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantation no. 15:12-15. "Let the grove quake! Let the clouds gather! Let the moisture fall! Let my potency be flowing river water! Let my penis be a (taut) harp string so that it will not slip out of her!"¹⁵

Lines 5-10 describe the gate and bolt of the "palace". I cannot propose a satisfactory explanation for these lines or even safely argue that these are metaphors at all. Yet, structurally these lines keep to the general pattern of the previous lines, that is a statement "its...is..." followed by a wish clause. Therefore the component of the statement may also have a transferred meaning. In that case perhaps these lines deal with the actual love making.

5. The structure of this line should be consistent with the pattern of the couplets, however it is difficult. Presumably, the door signifies the opening to the vagina¹⁶. Consequently perhaps ra-gaba signifies "courier" in the sense of a carrier of messages. At the same time ra-gaba — "rider" suits the possibility of sexual activity, as it may be a coarse figurative allusion to the person involved. Note that the Akkadian verb *rakābu* has the meaning "to mate"¹⁷.

The wish clause is particularly difficult. Bendt Alster suggested to me the reading ḥarran (KASKAL) sā-a-ḡá ḥa-gub, suggesting that the inserted <si>, proposed by Hallo and accepted by Veldhuis, is superfluous. Therefore, we should probably interpret the verb sā = *kašādu* (MSL 14, 134 ii 26), literally: "in my reaching the road". The verbal form ḥa-gub, without dimensional prefix remains a problem. Note that in Ur III gub with dative signifies "serve" (i.e. Urnamma A:162) If this was intended it would mean "may it (the door) serve me (as a carrier) when I reach the road". For KASKAL in the context of love-making compare ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantation no. 2:1, "who has blocked your ways like (those) of a traveller"¹⁸. Veldhuis translated: "May its door, which is a rider, stand open when I finish my journey," meaning to the netherworld. I tentatively propose to translate: "Its door (of the "palace") is a courier — may it stand (open? serve?) when I reach the road," meaning the vagina.

6-7. The translation follows Hallo: "Its bolt is a messenger, may it turn in it for me". These lines complement l. 5 and accordingly I propose that the messenger is figuratively the penis.

8-9. Veldhuis translates: "May its crossbeams be the Lama at my favourable side/ that shines brightly on my right shoulder". Apart for LAM my translation follows Hallo: "Its crossbeam is LAM, may it be at my favourable side, may it shine at my right". However, the meaning of LAM is difficult. Hallo rendered "extensive", probably in the semantic field of

¹⁵ Biggs 1967:35. In principle I object to the use of later texts to elucidate an earlier one, but since I know of no Ur III or Old Babylonian exemplar of ŠÀ.ZI.GA I present the late text as a typological comparison.

¹⁶ Comparable to the uses of *ká*, see examples in CAD B, 24, c, 1'. Note also in YOS 11, 19:6: *bābam ša wālitim*.

¹⁷ CAD R, 87 3.b. See also ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations 14:3-4 or no. 23:11, Biggs 1967:33 and 42 (resp.)

¹⁸ Biggs 1967:18.

ešēbu = "abundant", "luxuriant"¹⁹. Veldhuis rendered Lama, which makes very good sense, particularly in such a context. Assuming that /-bi/ in ḡiš-bal refers to the bolt in the previous phrase, and in line with the interpretation proposed above, I would suggest that the "cross-beam" is also an image of the penis²⁰. Thus LAM may mean simply "protective spirit", which accounts for the omission of the divine determinative²¹.

10. I suppose that the possessive pron. /-b(i)-a/ in the first compound "at its gate" refers to the "palace", and the second *gú-bi* "its neck" refers to the bolt of l. 6. Thus "gate" would describe the opening of the vagina and the "neck" is the penis. Thereby, the last phrase further develops the subject but also links up with the l. 1 and creates a sort of a literary and thematic framework. In this context I suggest a literal but figurative translation: "In its gate (of the "palace" = womb) may his 'neck' (of the "bolt" = penis) rise for me". The Akkadian ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations provide quite a few examples for the use of ZI = *tebû* in sexual activity.

11-18. The supplicant concludes with an invocation of the divine forces whom he expects to interfere on his behalf and the closing formula of the spell.

11-13. The appeal to the personal god is self-evident. However, the call upon Inanna to be his vanguard makes the best sense in a spell which involves love, or aims to ensure a successful sexual activity. For the involvement of Ištar in incantations against impotency see some examples in ŠÀ.ZI.GA: nos. 19:22 ("The incantation of Ištar, goddess of love"), 20:12', 21:11, 25:11²².

14-15. The reading *i-du₈* for KAK.DU remains difficult because it involves two amendments. I cannot improve on Hallo's reading and accept his translation: "May she/he make my doorkeeper bow to the ground / as for me, may I raise my neck to heaven". I understand these lines as an antithetic parallelism. The antithetic position of the supplicant and the gatekeeper suggests that the latter may be an obstacle that causes the problem²³. Line 15 seems to me as a play on the words of line 10.

16-18. See Veldhuis.

Translation

1. The palace — a forest.
2. May the well-formed *gú-ur₅* bird saturate it with water.
3. Its interior is a great oven whose fire is lit.
4. May it (the bird) sprinkle clear water (semen?) for me
5. Its door (of the "palace") is a courier — may it stand (open/for service) when I reach the road.
6. Its bolt is a messenger,
7. May it turn in it for me.
8. Its crossbeam (of the bolt) is a protective spirit — may it be at my favourable side,
9. May it shine at my right.
10. In its gate (of the "palace") may his 'neck' (of the "bolt") rise for me.
11. May Inanna be my vanguard,
12. May my (personal) god be my helper.

¹⁹ CAD E, 352.

²⁰ In ŠÀ.ZI.GA, Biggs 1967:41:28, the penis is compared to a piece of wood.

²¹ The writing LAM á-ša₆-ga may be an allusion to ^dLamma-ša₆-ga, as a secondary undertone.

²² Biggs 1967:38-44.

²³ Perhaps the father of the woman? Compare with the references to the gate in the Dumuzi — Inanna love songs, DI H: rev. 4,6 and DI G:4 in Sefati 1998:177 and 186 (resp.)

13. May he walk behind me.
14. May he make my gatekeeper bow to the ground,
15. And I, may I raise my neck to heaven.
16. In the shrine of Enki, Asare in his abzu
17. Will not be able to undo.
18. Since Nanše is at my side.

Looking at the realistic erotic scenes on Old Babylonian clay plaques, considering their quantity, distribution and their function, it seems to me that this spell is a verbal expression of the same nature and purpose. Compared with the representations on the plaques, perhaps the images which seem to me overly outspoken may have been conventional, reflecting a relaxed and pragmatic attitude toward sex. Assante maintains that the plaques were made for the non-elite public²⁴. However, the creation of a written text requires much longer training than shaping images in clay, especially when plaques were made by means of a mould that allows a mass production. Therefore, it stands to reason that the acquisition of a written spell as ours would be above the means of the greater part of the population. This perhaps is the reason for the rarity of this text. The practical purpose may account for the plain imagery when compared with the richness of the Dumuzi-Inanna love songs. However, some literary properties of the text suggest that it was created by a well educated scribe. Hallo already commented on the high standard of the writing. To that we may add that the structure text points to the literary skills of the scribe. The first section, ll. 1-10 is arranged in couplets of the same pattern, and the theme was developed progressively from one couplet to the next as a chain of related features. Line 10, the last of this section closes a circle and creates a framework by referring to the first line of the text. The appeals to Inanna and the personal god forms the second part, ll. 11-15. This passage links up with the first section by means of a word-play between the last line of each section, namely l. 15 and l. 10. The third part, ll. 16-18, is a standard formula to which a personal note was added as a solution: "since Nanše is at my side".

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²⁴ Assante 2002:30.

LUGAL-E AND THE SONG OF ULLIKUMMI; A STRUCTURAL COMPARISON*

FUMI KARAHASHI (PHILADELPHIA)

In the cuneiform literature of Mesopotamia and Anatolia, several stories tell of a god doing battle against a mountain or a stone. This paper will compare the story lines of two of these mythological compositions, the Sumero-Akkadian Lugal-e and the Hurro-Hittite Song of Ullikummi.

Lugal-e, one of the major Ninurta myths, tells of his fight against the Asag monster, his creating the irrigation system, and his decreeing the fates of various stones. This composition is handed down to us in a Sumerian monolingual version from the Old Babylonian period and in a bilingual Sumero-Akkadian version from the Middle Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Neo-Assyrian periods¹.

The Song of Ullikummi belongs to the Kumarbi Cycle of Hurrian origin, which was acquired by the Hittites probably towards the end of the 15th century BC². Of the Kumarbi Cycle, the most well known to the student of comparative religion is the Song of Kumarbi, which is also called the Theogony or Kingship in Heaven. It deals with the succession to divine kingship: Alalu's rule is overthrown by Anu, whose rule is taken away by Alalu's offspring, Kumarbi, who in turn loses control of heaven to Anu's offspring, Teššub. Since the publication of this Hittite text Hittitologists and Classicists have been studying this episode and its close parallel in Hesiod's Theogony, the succession of Uranos, Kronos, to Zeus³. The Song of Kumarbi is assumed to be the first in the sequence of the cycle, followed by four

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¹ J. J. A. van Dijk, *LUGAL UD ME-LÁM-bi NIR-ĜÁL: Le récit épique et didactique des Travaux de Ninurta, du Déluge et de la Nouvelle Création*, 2 vols (Leiden, 1983). The text is also available through the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcls.orient.ox.ac.uk>): *ETCSL* 1.6.2.

² A. Archi, Hittite and Hurrian Literatures: An Overview, in *CANE*, 2373. According to G. McMahon, the strong Hurrian influence on Hittite culture became evident at the Middle Hittite period and came to dominate the culture in the New Hittite period (Idem, *Theology, Priests, and Worship in Hittite Anatolia*, in *CANE*, 1985).

³ For the bibliography, see Ch. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (London, 1994) 185 note. 6; see also A. Bernabé, Generaciones de dioses y sucesión interrumpida. El mito hitita de Kumarbi, la <<Teogonía>> de Hesíodo y la del <<Papiro de Derveni>>, *Aula Orientalis* 7 (1989) 159-179; Ph. H. J. Houwink ten Cate, De hurritische 'theogonie' en 'theomachie' in de Hettitische redactie en het Griekse gebruik van de conceptie, in: D. van der Plas, B. Becking, and D. Meijer (eds.), *De schepping van de Wereld: Mythische voorstellingen in het Oude Nabije Oosten* (Muiderberg, 1990) 97-126; R. Lebrun, From Hittite Mythology: The Kumarbi Cycle, in *CANE*, 1971-1980; M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997) 276-305.