

A NOTE ON THE RITUAL BACKGROUND OF SENDING THE HEM
AND THE LOCK OF HAIR

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In a number of texts from Mari we are told that along with the report of a prophetic revelation the hem and the lock of hair belonging to the prophet are sent to the king (ARM XXVI, I/1, nos. 198, 200, 201, 204, 213, 214, 215, 219). This practice has been studied by various scholars, for which I may refer to Noort's convenient bibliographical survey and summaries by author.¹

A magical-religious background for the practice, which seems peculiar to Mari, is commonly denied in favour of a juridical explanation. The reason for this is not difficult to find. The fact is that scholars primarily focus their attention on the hem which from various juridical contexts is known to have served as a token of identity. Applied to the prophetic Mari texts, a prophet is said to be submitted to the authority of someone who receives his hem, viz. the king. The prophet is only to be released from legal claims if his message had been confirmed by the haruspex. This explanation seems sound, although the kind of sanctions the prophet would have to face is not clear at all. The main difficulty, however, is that the lock of hair can serve as a token of identity as well² and *prima facie* this would mean that we are concerned with an apparently meaningless double of the hem.

The beginning of a possible solution of our problem we find in A. 2264 (ARM XXVI I/1, no. 204), because here we are informed of what happened to the hem and the lock of hair. I shall only quote the relevant part:

Text A.

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| 16. <i>a-nu-um-ma ša-ar-ti</i>
<i>u si-si-ik-ti ad-di-na-ki-im</i> | “Herewith my (lock of) hair
and (a piece of) my hem I (Innibana) have given to you.” |
| 18. <i>li-za-ak-ku-u</i>
<i>i-na-an-na a-nu-um-ma</i> | “May they purify (them).”
“Now, herewith, |
| 20. <i>ša-ar-tam u si-si-ik-tam</i>
<i>a-na ka-ak-ka-bi u-ša-bi-lam</i> | the (lock of) hair and (a piece of) the hem
I (Inibšina) have sent to my Star. |
| 22. <i>ka-ak-ka-bi te-er-tam</i>
<i>li-še-pi-iš-ma a-na zi-im</i> | Let my Star have an omen
taken (so that) |
| 24. <i>te-re-ti-šu ka-ak-ka-bi</i>
<i>li-pu-uš</i> | my Star in accordance with his omens
may act.” |

¹ E. Noort, *Untersuchungen zum Gottesbescheid in Mari* (1977), 84, n. 2.

² S. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung* (BF 18, 1994), 75-77; H. Scheying, *Das Haar in Ritualen des alten Mesopotamien*, *WdO* 29 (1998), 58-79.

The prophetess Innibana is sending her hem and her lock of hair to Inibšina, requesting to have them both purified (l. 16-18). Inibšina, from her part, asks the king to take an omen in order to confirm the veracity of the prophetic message. To her, Innibana's purification is obviously second to and dependent upon the outcome of the omen (l. 22-24).

According to Durand (ARM XXVI I/1, 57, 432) the verb *zukkûm* refers to "Offrir un sacrifice pour savoir si la divinité est irritée" and he translates *lizakkû* (l. 18) "On doit faire le sacrifice de purification," although he admits that he cannot find any reason why the deity should be annoyed. He firmly rejects Finet's earlier view that we are dealing with the purification of the hem and the lock of hair. In the Ancient Middle East, however, the concept of purity has often strong religious overtones.³ No doubt Finet is in the right not only because of the widely attested literal meaning of *zukkûm* "to purify" but also because he has found a reliable ally in the Old Babylonian *ikribum*, which has been published by Goetze⁴ and has been analyzed by Hurowitz.⁵ The relevant part of this *ikribum* runs as follows:

Text B.

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|---|--|
| 1. ³ Šamaš a-ša-ka-an a-na pi-ia ^{8is} erinnam
el-la-am a-ša-ni-ip-ku i-na i-ti-iq
pi-ir-ti-ia | O Šamaš, I am placing pure cedar in my mouth. I am wrapping it up for you in the lock of my hair. |
| 3. a-ša-ka-an-ku-um i-na sū-ni-ia ⁶
ša-bi-am ^{8is} erinnam | I am placing for you in my hem compact cedar resin. |
| 5. em-sí pi-ia ù qá-ti-ia
ak-pu-ur pi-ia i-na ša-bi-im ^{8is} erinnim | I have washed my mouth and my hands. I have wiped my mouth with (resin of) compact cedar. |
| 7. aš-ni-ip ^{8is} erinnam el-la-am i-na i-ti-iq
pi-ir-ti-ia al-ta-ba-ak-ku ša-bi-am
^{8is} erinnam | I have wrapped up pure cedar (resin) in the lock of my hair. I have poured out for you compact cedar (resin) |
| 9. el-le-ku a-na pu-ḥu-ur ì-lí e-ṭe-eḥ-ḥi
a-na di-nim | I am pure. I am approaching the assembly of the gods for judgement. |
| 12. i-na ik-ri-ib a-ka-ra-bu i-na te-er-ti e-pu-šu
ki-it-tam šu-uk-nam | By means of the divinatory liturgy I am reciting and the act of divination I will perform, place for me a reliable answer. |

The ritual is framed in terms of a process (*dīnum*) and staged in front of Šamaš, the divine judge and chairman of the assembly of the gods (l. 1, 9-10).⁷

There is a fundamental difference between the scope of purification of the ritualist and of the prophetess Innibana. The ritualist cannot proceed on the sacred stage unless he shares the purity of the gods he is addressing. The purity of his mouth and hands is emphasized with

³ *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, vol. 9 (1979) 430-473.

⁴ A. Goetze, An Old Babylonian Prayer of the Divination Priest, *JCS* 22 (1968), 25-29.

⁵ V. Hurowitz, Isaiah's Impure Lips and Their purification in Light of Akkadian Sources, *HUCA* 40 (1989), 39-89, esp. 63 sqq.

⁶ Cf. ARM XXVI I/1, no. 234: *sissikti šubātišu u itqam ša qaqqadišu* "the hem of his garment and the lock of hair from his head" instead of the usual *šartum u sissiktum* "the hair and the hem." See the remarks by Nakata, *Acta Sumerologica* 3 (1981), 147, n. 11. With Hurowitz *op. cit.*, 66 and n. 88, I take *sūnum* "lap", "loincloth" as equivalent of *sissiktum*. See CAD S, 389b, c), for *sūnum* as part of a garment or loincloth: "to provide a garment with a *sūnum* in Yamhad-style; *sunātum šakākum* "to attach as a long strip". The *sissiktum* cannot be conceived as the suspension cord ("cordelette") of a cylinder seal, as Durand (ARM XXVI I/1, 179, n 1) argues.

⁷ I. Star, *The Bārû Rituals* (1974), 78-82.

regard to the *dicenda* and the *facienda* of the ritual (l. 5). Total purity he attains by purifying his mouth, his hem and the lock of his hair with cedar resin (l. 1-3; present tense). The result of the latter procedure is expressed in l. 6-8 (perfect tense) and notably in *ellēku* "I am pure" (stative; l. 9). The purity, which enables the ritualist to communicate with the gods (l. 9-10), is not just a matter of physical cleanliness. According to van der Toorn, the verb *ellu* "to be pure" refers to his luminosity, which reflects the *namru* "luminous appearance" of the gods.⁸

The primary task of the ritualist is to investigate whether a message such as Innibana's is an authentic divine message with which the king has to comply (text A, l. 22-24; text B, l. 12-13). The prophetess does not participate in the ritual he performs but she is only present *in absentia* by the tokens of her personality. Unlike the ritualist, her hem and lock of hair have been cut off. This procedure is related to *namburbi* rituals, which had the purpose of warding off disasters which might befall someone as a result of bad omens. Of particular interest to us are *namburbi* rituals, in which a puppet is made of a sufferer, whose sufferings are conceived of as originating in a sin he wittingly or unwittingly committed. The sin is loaded upon the substitute and by cutting its hem (*sissiktum*) the sin is removed. The puppet is thrown into the river in order to have the evil removed for ever.⁹

Symbolically, Innibana is present in the court of Šamaš and his divine judges. To them she was addressing her request (Text A., l. 18) *lizakkû* "may they purify (me),"¹⁰ which means that she is expressing her hopes that the court will confirm that she has spoken the truth. The verbal root *zakû/zukkû* "to become clean/ to purify" is often extended, as here, to a juridical context having the sense of "to (be) free of guilt" (CAD Z, 1961, 26 a-b).

If Innibana has spoken the truth, her hem and her lock of hair, symbols of her personality, are purified. But what if she turns out not to have spoken the truth? Is she liable to legal claims? This line of thought is perhaps a too modern conception. As a matter of fact, there are no legal claims in front of a court consisting of human judges. Innibana has far worse to fear. Convicted by Šamaš and his divine judges and struck by their wrath, she has to bear the consequences of her falsehood. This fits the Mesopotamian conception of sin and sanction, of which a famous text like *Ludlul bēl nemeqi* and many others offer terrifying examples.¹¹

⁸ K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* (1985), 28.

⁹ S. Maul, *op. cit.*, 126.

¹⁰ Moran remarks that the subject of *lizakkû* is not the hem and the lock of hair, for which precativ 3 pl. fem. would have been required. However, he does not explain to whom the 3 pl. masc. is referring to. See W.L. Moran, *New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy*, in: *Biblica* 50 (1969), 22-23.

¹¹ See K. van der Toorn, *op. cit.*, 56 sqq.