

## The first omen of *Šumma ālu* Tablet 17

Ignacio Márquez Rowe – ILC, CSIC (Madrid)

Omens associated with the digging of a well are the subject matter of Tablet 17 of the Akkadian canonical divinatory series *Šumma ālu*. Its first line, reconstructed from three extant sources, is easy to read but difficult to understand. Sally M. Freedman, who provided an edition of the first twenty-one tablets of the series in 1998, read it as follows:<sup>1</sup>

DIŠ NA *ina* MURU<sub>4</sub>E<sub>2</sub>-šu PU<sub>2</sub> BAD *ina* zi : ni LUGAL GAL<sub>2</sub>

The protasis stating the case of the omen can be easily transcribed in Akkadian, *šumma amēlu ina qabal bītīšu būrta ipte*, and rendered: “If a man opens a well in the middle of his house”. The crux lies in the apodosis. Freedman admitted that she could not make sense of the signs < zi : ni > despite the fact that they are clear on all three texts,<sup>2</sup> and left the translation of the prediction incomplete and inadequate:

If a man opens a well in the middle of his house, there will be a king in ...<sup>3</sup>

Rosel Pientka-Hinz chose Tablet 17 as her example of the series of so-called terrestrial omens in the new edition of the German anthology of ancient Near Eastern texts in translation *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, published in 2008, and translated line 1 as follows:

Wenn ein Mann in der Mitte seines Hauses einen Brunnen öffnet, wird während des Aushebens ein König auftreten.<sup>4</sup>

Her rendering of < *ina* zi : ni > as “während des Aushebens” with a reference to the verb *nasāḫu*<sup>5</sup> (and with no question mark) is at least awkward, if not incorrect, and certainly

---

1. *If a City is Set on a Height*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia 1998, pp. 254, 262 (also p. 19). Note, however, that the fourth sign should be read either MURUB<sub>4</sub> or MURU<sub>2</sub>.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 254 note to l. 1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 255 (also p. 19).

4. “Akkadische Texte des 2. Und 1. Jt. V. Chr. 1. Omina und Prophetien” in B. Janowski and G. Wilhelm (eds.), *Omina, Orakel, Rituale und Beschwörungen* (TUAT NF), vol. 4, Gütersloh 2008, p. 35.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 35 n. 47.

unconvincing, as is the resulting interpretation of the prediction, indeed odd and totally unusual (apodoses tend to be formulaic and recurrent).

Wiebke Meinhold has apparently neither been persuaded by Pientka-Hinz's interpretation, but has not been able to suggest an alternative interpretation in her recent discussion of *Šumma ālu* Tablet 17. She agrees with Freedman that the text of the apodosis is not clear at all and follows her translation too:

in ... wird es ein König geben.<sup>6</sup>

The solution I propose to this puzzling question, being a simple one, a priori has good chances of being the correct one. It is based on the fact that the colon, a sign normally consisting of two diagonal wedges, was used by ancient professional scribes to separate and incorporate viz. interpolate variant versions of the same text.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, this practice was rather common in the edition of omen series.<sup>8</sup> The reading I suggest of *Šumma ālu* Tablet 17:1 is the following:

DIŠ NA ina MURUB<sub>4</sub> E<sub>2</sub>-š<sub>u</sub> PU<sub>2</sub> BAD ina-zi- : i<sub>3</sub>-LUGAL iq

The peculiarity here, if one may call it so, is that the interpolation of the variant apodosis i<sub>3</sub>-LUGAL, a learned rebus orthography for the verb form *išarru*, breaks up the verb form *inazziq* syllabically spelled.<sup>9</sup> The reason for this editorial feature can be sought in another conventional ancient Mesopotamian scribal practice. In omen tablets lines are generally complete omens. Short apodoses, like the present one, are accordingly spaced so that the last sign, in this case < iq > following < ina-zi- >, reaches the end of the line, viz. the right margin of the tablet. The empty space then is used here to insert the variant apodosis, properly introduced with a colon mark.

Both *inazziq* and *išarru* are recurring apodoses in ancient Mesopotamian omen collections. The resulting translation of the first line of *Šumma ālu* Tablet 17 is then the following:

If a man opens a well in the middle of his house, he will come to grief, var. he will become rich.

Confirmation of this new interpretation is provided by a new reading of one of the three extant sources of this line, namely the Assyrian excerpt text K.11737 (source Ex[2] in Freedman's edition), which is published here with the courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. It will be observed that it is the only copy of this line by an Assyrian hand, K.2312+ and MM 889 each inscribed with the complete text of *Šumma ālu* Tablet 17 in Babylonian script.

6. "Zu Ritualen und Brunnenbau in der Omenserie *Šumma ālu*", in C. Ambos, N. HeBel and W. Meinhold (eds.), *kullat tušarrūti. Festschrift für Stefan M. Maul*, Wiesbaden 2023, p. 455 n. 30.

7. See e.g. most recently E. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation*, Münster 2011, p. 16; J. Wee, *Knowledge and Rhetoric in Medical Commentary. Ancient Mesopotamian Commentaries on a Handbook of Medical Diagnosis (Sa-gig)*, Leiden/Boston 2019, pp. 41ff.; or A. Bácskay, *Glosses and Embedded Variants in Mesopotamian Therapeutic Texts*, Münster 2021.

8. See e.g. already J. Bottéro, "Symptômes, signes, écritures en Mésopotamie ancienne", in J.P. Vernant *et al.*, *Divination et rationalité*, Paris 1974, p. 83. See in the same Tablet 17 of *Šumma ālu* lines 11, 16, 18 and 19.

9. Note also the irregularity caused by the interpolation in line 16 (cf. Freedman's remarks in *If a City*, p. 255). Or a similar layout of apodosis with interpolation in the third line of K.2850+ = *Šumma ālu* Tablet 20.

As clearly shown by the present author's photograph and handcopy (and missing in Freedman's edition and subsequent commentaries), the Assyrian scribe added a small colon mark after *i*<sub>3</sub>-LUGAL, as if aware of the ambiguity of the Babylonian edition. Line 3' reads:

[                    ]-zi- : *i*<sub>3</sub>-LUGAL : *iq*

The Assyrian scribe, unlike his Babylonian colleagues, thus eliminated the ambiguity by enclosing the variant text between colon marks, not very different in fact to our current use of brackets. One can also notice that he had recourse to still one more editorial tweak: the variant, particularly distinct in the case of the sign < LUGAL >, is inscribed in smaller and thinner script.<sup>10</sup>

By way of conclusion, it may be worth pointing out the irony (or anticlimax, as Miquel Civil would say in these cases) that in his edition of the Montserrat tablet MM 889, Richard Caplice transliterated its first line as:

DIŠ NA *ina* MURUB<sub>4</sub> É-šu TÚL BAD *ina-zi-<iq>* : *i-šàr-[ru]*<sup>11</sup>

and accordingly translated it:

If a man opens a well in the middle of his house, he will have trouble, (var.) he will grow rich.<sup>12</sup>



(1:1)



K.11737

10. Note furthermore that in line 7' corresponding to Tablet 17:11 the order of the two variants of the apodosis in the alleged standard edition is inverted, reading DUGUD: *ZI-ah* (correct Freedman, *If a City*, p. 263).

11. "Further Namburbi Notes", *OrNS* 42 (1973) p. 511 (note that he had previously published in "Namburbi Texts in the British Museum. V", *OrNS* 40 [1971] pl. V, a photograph of K.2312+ joined already to the small fragment K.13902 which preserves the end of line 1).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 513.