Recent Advances in the Study of Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine

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The last several years have witnessed renewed interest in medicine in ancient Assyria and Babylonia, spurred in part by discovery of new textual sources, but also by an interest in looking anew at texts long known.

The written traditions of Babylonian and Assyrian medicine are largely of Babylonian origin, though it appears that there was a new emphasis in Assyria, particularly under the king Assurbanipal (reigned 668-627 B.C.). The fact remains that the largest proportion of texts recovered are from Assyria, especially from the shattered remains of Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh, but also from the old Assyrian capital at Assur, principally excavated by German expeditions in the twentieth century. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the written medical traditions continued in Babylonia after the fall of Assyria as is evidenced particularly by finds in the far southern city of Uruk and in tablets from the Babylon-Sippar area now in the British Museum (many unpublished). A notable exception to the primacy of Babylonia is the explanatory plant list URU.AN.NA = maštakal, which is known exclusively from copies found in Assyria.

I will comment here, in no particular order, mostly on some of the recent contributions that have expanded our understanding of medical practice in ancient Mesopotamia.

There is now a specialized journal devoted to medical texts written in cuneiform: Le Journal des médecines cunéiformes, founded in 2003, and published in Saint-Germaine-en-Laye, France. While the title is French, the journal publishes also in English and German. Articles include translations of selected cuneiform medical texts and studies of individual topics.

Erica Reiner, in Astral Magic in Babylonia (Philadelphia, 1995), writes extensively on the Babylonian practice of setting medications out overnight under the stars. Sometimes the texts specify that the concoctions should be set out facing the Goat Star. The Goat Star represents the goddess Gula, the goddess of healing and medicine.

The 2001 international Assyriological meeting in Helsinki had as its theme Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East. The papers were published in a volume with the same title, edited by Simo Parpola and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki, 2002). Among the papers was my contribution, "The Babylonian Sexual Potency Texts." In this paper I discuss the genre as a whole and translate selected passages. I suggest there that an ingredient in the medications, rikibti ayāli, which occurs nowhere except in potions to treat impotence, may be deer velvet, that is, the soft and vascular hairy skin that envelops and nourishes the antlers of deer during their rapid growth but later peels off or is rubbed off by the animal. This material, containing a high level of testosterone, is used as an aphrodisiac in the traditional

medicine of some societies and is harvested when the stag is coming into the mating season.

In 2000 Marten Stol published his Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting (Groningen, The Netherlands, 2000). This is a wide-ranging study by one of today's most prolific writers on ancient medicine. It covers conception and embryology, problems during pregnancy, magic and divine influence, prognostication (including horoscopes), the birth process (including its reflection in ancient mythology), the physical appearance of the child (such as resemblance to parents and abnormalities), midwifery and nursing. I covered some of the same topics in a paper written in the mid-1990s but not published until 2000: Robert Biggs, "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia," in A. R. George and I. L. Finkel, eds., Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert (Winona Lake, Indiana, 2000), pp. 1-13.

To Marten Stol we also owe a monograph, Epilepsy in Babylonia (Groningen, 1993), a detailed examination of the ancient terminology, the question of diagnosis, treatment, and including the supposed influence of the moon.

The volume dedicated to W. G. Lambert cited above also includes a lengthy article by Irving L. Finkel, "On Late Babylonian Medical Training", pp. 137-223. Here he publishes 88 tablets and fragments from the late first millennium B.C. These are all one-column tablets (as opposed to library copies that are normally multi-columns) containing a single prescription or two or three closely related prescriptions. He makes the important observation that the writers of these tablets apparently distinguished between asûtu, "medical" and āšipūtu, "magical" in that the medical tablets have a vertical orientation (which he calls "portrait") whereas the magical have a horizontal orientation (which he calls "landscape"). He further points out that these medical tablets normally give the quantities required of each drug, whereas the traditional library copies rarely give quantities at all.

The standard edition of the Babylonian diagnostic medical texts has long been René Labat, Traité akkadien de diagnostics et pronostics médicaux. 2 volumes (Paris and Leiden, 1951). This composition is often referred to in English as the Akkadian Diagnostic Handbook. But new discoveries in archaeological excavations and new identifications in museum collections have considerably increased the corpus since the time of Labat. Nils Heessel in Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik, Alter Orient und Altes Testament, vol. 43 (Münster, 2000) provides a new and detailed introduction to the genre and provides new editions of a number of tablets (that is, chapters) of the lengthy series.

A volume that is likely to have a lasting impact on the study of Near Eastern medicine appeared in late 2004. It is H.F.J. Horstmanshoff and M. Stol, eds., Magic and Rationality in Ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman Medicine. Studies in Ancient Medicine, vol. 27 (Leiden, 2004). I want to comment on several of the most important contributions relating to

ancientMesopotamian medicine. A review of the whole volume is accessible at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2005/2005-04-65.html>.

In this volume M. J. Geller studies the fundamental question of how the system of medicine or prognosis described in the Akkadian Diagnostic Handbook compares with similar texts in the Greek medical corpus. He points out that in both Greece and Babylonia, medical texts tended to be copied and studied by professional healers stemming from certain families, but that the literary revolution represented by Greek science permitted writers to write their own opinions under their own names, whereas Babylonian medical texts are anonymous, with no hint of any discussions or disputes through which the final compositions were arrived at. He mentions that Babylonian medical texts are anonymous, with no hint of any discussions or disputes through which the final compositions were arrived at. He also points out that Babylonian medical texts have no reference to diet or any advice on remaining healthy. On p. 21 he suggests that earlier Greek medicine and late Babylonian medicine had features in common. Hippocratic physicians began to work with case histories, whereas we have no individual case histories in the Babylonian medical texts. He also compares the Babylonian Diagnostic Handbook with the Prognosticon in the Corpus Hippocraticum. He observes that the actual art of symptom notation and prognostics was not much further advanced in early Greek medicine than in contemporary Babylonia, but that the new departure of Greek medicine took the form of therapy, including such things as diet and fasting, whereas Babylonian medicine carried on its traditional methods of pharmacology. He concludes (p. 59) by saying it is not possible to trace any definite borrowings from Babylonian medicine, but there are enough similarities to suggest some kind of relationship between pre-Hippocratic Greek and Babylonian medicine.

In a second article, Geller writes on "Bloodletting in Babylonia." He observes that the Babylonian Talmud serves as a mirror reflecting the final phases of local Babylonian culture. He has an important observation when he says that medical information originating from Graeco-Roman Palestine was recorded and transmitted in Hebrew and that medical lore from Babylonia was composed and preserved in Aramaic, the local language of Babylonia. He specifically adds that bloodletting is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud in Aramaic. He introduces the term "incantation-therapist" as a translation of āšipu, which we have traditionally translated as "exorcist" or "magician."

Nils Heessel discusses whether Babylonian diagnosis can be called "scientific." He insists that "magical" and "rational" elements are inseparable. He also observes that the Babylonians did not adhere to our modern concept that divination and medicine are separate fields of endeavor. He points out that the left-right principle of divinatory texts is not used in the diagnostic texts. In fact, he insists that the diagnostic texts cannot be understood as omens.

Walter Farber writes on epidemics, contagion, and a magic ritual against "Hand of the ghost."

I mention here a recent book that might appear rather peripheral. It is

Carmen Caballero-Navas, The Book of Women's Love and Jewish Medieval Medical Literature on Women: Seper Ahavat Nashim (London, 2004). In view of the documented survival of elements of Babylonian and Assyrian medicine in the Talmud, it is not surprising that a great many of the prescriptions sound as if they have been translated from Babylonian texts. Perhaps it is a coincidence, but perhaps there is more to the similarities.

There is a recent German dissertation on eye diseases in Babylonian medical texts. It is Jeanette Fincke, Augenleiden nach keilschriftlichen Quellen: Untersuchungen zur altorientalischen Medizin [Eye diseases according to cuneiform sources: researches on ancient Near Eastern medicine] in the series Würzburger medizinhistorische Forschungen, vol. 70 (Würzburg, 2000). She investigates the descriptions of the diseases, the terminology to describe symptoms, and details of treatment.

An important volume now in press (and which I have read in manuscript) is M. J. Geller, Renal and Rectal Disease Texts, which forms volume 7 of Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen. In contrast to the first six volumes of this series (which had only cuneiform copies without translations), this volume has English translations and philological notes. This will be the only category of Babylonian and Assyrian medical texts to be available in up-to-date translations. It is being published by Walter de Gruyter in Berlin, and is expected to be available in summer, 2005.

I conclude by mentioning a rather old study which has largely escaped notice but which may be of interest to readers of this journal: David Hooper (with notes by Henry Field), Useful Plants and Drugs of Iran and Iraq, Field Museum of Natural History, Botanical Series, vol. 9/3 (Chicago, 1937). Henry Fields' notes give the names in Arabic and Persian and provide copious comments on uses in the local traditional medical practice in the 1930s.