

# An instructive scribal error on a cuneiform medical tablet

Martin Worthington

Disciplines concerned with the study of ancient writings have to reckon with the possibility of textual corruption. In Classics, faults in textual transmission are mostly laid at the door of medieval and renaissance scribes, who copied Greek and Latin manuscripts long after the civilisations of the ancient Greeks and Romans were dead. Accordingly, the errors in the manuscripts usually reflect misunderstandings which occurred in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In Assyriology, extant manuscripts (clay tablets, stone inscriptions, etc.) were produced by the ancients themselves, so errors tell us about the misunderstandings of native users of cuneiform. Hence the close study of cuneiform errors and their typologies is a *desideratum*: not only does it help to clarify received text; it also promises to teach us much about ancient literacy, the process textual transmission, and how the script was used and understood.

Of the several ways in which errors could arise, one was that scribes misread or misunderstood the written sources they had before them (German ‘*Vorlagen*’, sing. ‘*Vorlage*’), and wrote down what they (mis)understood rather than what stood on the *Vorlagen*. A number of such cases have been identified on manuscripts of literary compositions,<sup>1</sup> but for other textual typologies text-critical research is less advanced. We shall present a case from the corpus of therapeutic tablets.

We shall study a passage from a medical prescription attested on two Neo-Assyrian manuscripts, one (henceforth: MS K) published by F. Köcher (*Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin*, vol. 2) as BAM 156, the other (hence-

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance The Babylonian Theodicy XXVII 289 (W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* 88): as observed by Lambert ad loc. (p. 89), the sequence of signs *gir gaz ki nu ú* on MS m represents a misreading of *mut-nin-nu-ú* ‘suppliant’, attested on MSS a and C.

forth: MS H) by P. Herrero in ‘Une tablette médicale assyrienne inédite’, *Revue d’Assyriologie* 69 (1975) 41-53.<sup>2</sup> The relevant passage is as follows:

K <sub>8</sub>	<i>ana</i>	<i>hi-i</i> [q ka]š <sup>š</sup> <sup>sim</sup> MAN.DI	gi dūg	šub	<i>ina</i> udun lú.kurun.na
H <sub>ii.5</sub>	<i>ana</i>	<sup>2</sup> šà <sup>3</sup> <i>hi-iq</i>	kaš <sup>š</sup> <sup>sim</sup> MAN.DU	gi dūg.ga	šub- <i>di</i>
K <sub>9</sub>	<i>úš-ki</i> [ <i>r-ma</i> ]			<sup>o</sup> e <sub>11</sub> - <i>ma</i>	kúm- <i>su-nu tu-še-eš-ši</i>
H <sub>ii.5-6</sub>	<i>úš-ma</i>	kaš lú.kurun.na	úš / e <sub>11</sub> - <i>ma</i>	kúm- <i>su-nu</i>	[ <i>t</i> ]u-š[e- <i>eš-š</i> ]i
K <sub>10</sub>	[ <i>u</i> ] <sup>l</sup> -šá- <i>ḫal</i>	ì.nun eš <sup>meš</sup> - <i>su</i>	<i>ina</i> šà	RA- <i>su</i>	
H <sub>ii.6</sub>	<i>ta-šá-ḫal</i>	ì.nun eš <sup>meš</sup> - <i>su</i>		RA- <i>s</i> [ <i>u</i> ?]	

Herrero read MS H differently:

H <sub>ii.5</sub>	<i>ana</i> šà	<i>hi-iq</i>	kaš <sup>š</sup> <sup>sim</sup> MAN.DU	gi dūg	šub- <i>di</i>	< <i>ina</i> udun lú.kurun.na
	<i>úš-ir</i> >	<i>šum</i> <sub>4</sub> (BAD)- <i>ma</i>	kaš lú.kurun.na			
H <sub>ii.6</sub>	<i>úš</i> e <sub>11</sub> - <i>ma</i>	kúm- <i>šu-nu</i>	[ <i>t</i> ]u-š[e- <i>eš-š</i> ]i	<i>ta-ša-ḫal</i>		

He translated as follows : ‘tu verseras ... du sureau et de la « canne douce » dans la bière mélangée ; <tu enfermeras (le tout) dans un four de cabaretier et> lorsque la bière de cabaretier sera chaude, tu la retireras (du four) ; (ensuite) tu enlè[veras] (la médication) tiède-fumante et tu (la) filtreras.’

Four difficulties with Herrero’s interpretation of MS H are that: 1) a rather large omission (*ina* udun lú.kurun.na *úš-ir*) has to be supposed on MS H; 2) MS H would have a phrase not attested on MS K (*šum*<sub>4</sub>-*ma* kaš lú.kurun.na *úš* ‘lorsque la bière de cabaretier sera chaude’), though the two tablets otherwise offer very similar witnesses to this prescription; 3) said phrase on MS H would be semantically redundant in view of *kum-su-nu* ‘while hot’; 4) *šumma* must be translated as ‘when’ (Herrero’s ‘lorsque’), but such a use of *šumma* (‘if’) is otherwise unknown.

A more economical solution is to presume that line ii.5 of MS H enshrines a corruption of the text preserved on MS K, and that the corruption occurred in the following steps: 1) the original sequence of signs read *ina* udun

<sup>2</sup> That these two tablets are duplicate MSS of this prescription was seen by Herrero, p. 51 n. 3.

lú.kurun.na úš ‘(various ingredients) you enclose in a brewer’s oven’,<sup>3</sup> as on MS K. 2) Perhaps owing to damage on the *Vorlage*, a scribe misread *ina udun* ‘in an oven’ as *tesekkir*(úš, i.e. BAD)-*ma* ‘(the same various ingredients) you enclose/heat’, and wrote down what he (mis)read; Herrero’s reading *šum<sub>4</sub>-ma* never existed. 3) With original *ina udun* misread as *tesekkir-ma*, there remained lú.kurun.na úš (*sābā tesekkir*) ‘you enclose/heat a brewer’, which made no sense, and so *kaš* ‘beer’ was added, giving the overall reading: (various ingredients) *tesekkir-ma šikar sābī tesekkir* ‘you enclose/heat (various ingredients), you enclose/heat brewer’s beer’. It is likely that the changes in steps (2) and (3) were made by one and the same copyist.

While occurrences of *he-pi* ‘(the *Vorlage*) is broken’ show that some scribes (or: scribes sometimes) copied medical tablets as seen, MS H is one of a growing number of instances showing that this was by no means always the case.<sup>4</sup> Rather, we have observed a scribe not particularly expert in reading medical literature (as evidenced by the misreading) copying a medical prescription, misunderstanding the *Vorlage*, and deliberately emending so as to produce a text he found meaningful. The inexpertise is suggestive of scribal instruction, possibly medical apprenticeship.

This situation encourages us to comb medical tablets for further instances of scribal errors and misunderstandings. For when a sufficiently large number of medical tablets are studied, textual criticism will help us to understand who wrote them, and why.

3 The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) books two *sekērus*, one meaning ‘to close, to block’ and another meaning ‘to heat’. We rather follow W. von Soden’s *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (AHw) in supposing that there is only one verb *sekēru*, with the basic meaning ‘to enclose’. When an oven or similar is not specified, we presume that it should be understood: ‘to enclose (in an oven, for warming up)’, so that in idiomatic English *sekēru* can be translated ‘to heat’. Accordingly, when an oven is specified we translate ‘to enclose’, when it is not we translate ‘to enclose/to heat’.

4 See for example *Le Journal des Médecines Cunéiformes* 7 (2006) p. 39 ad iii.45, iv.19, iv.21, iv.22, iv.23, p. 40 ad iv.28 and iv.29-30; and 5 (2005) p. 25 ad 68’, p. 27 ad 141’ and 162’, p. 33 ad 229’ and 237’.