

On Headache Tablets: Headache Incantations From Ur III (2113-2038 BC)

Vlad Zayas, MD

A recently published monograph by Johannes J.A. van Dijk and Markham J. Geller on Ur III (2113-2038 BC), contains two headache incantations.¹ These scholars translated and analyzed the tablets from the Frau Hilprecht-Sammlung collection in Jena. The geographic source of the tablets is the Sumerian city of Nippur. The age of these two incantations is determined by the nature of the excavation site and the grammatical structure of the text.

Much accumulated medical, judicial, mathematical and artistic knowledge has been salvaged from excavations in the Mesopotamian city-states, including the Sumerian city Ur. Mesopotamia and especially Sumer has been called "the cradle of Western civilization."

The writing system developed in Mesopotamia, called cuneiform, required a clay tablet marked with a stylus. That marked tablet was then baked. This technique preserved an enormous amount of written materials from many periods of Mesopotamian history including Ur III (2113-2038 BC). However, significant numbers of tablets remain uncatalogued and are still not translated. The medical history of Sumer therefore remains somewhat fragmented. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss a full historic picture of medicine in Mesopotamia. This may be found in several large works on the subject.⁸

There were two types of Mesopotamian medical practitioners: *ashipu*—a sorcerer, who dealt with magical aspects of the treatment, and an *asu*—a medical practitioner who provided pharmaco-therapeutic treatments including herbal concoctions, bandaging, plasters etc. The exact degree of the interaction between these two branches of Mesopotamian medicine remains unclear. It is unknown whether only *ashipus* were allowed to convey therapeutic incantations. Multiple therapeutic incantations in the medical armamentarium were directed against snakebites, paralysis and headaches. (A large collection of incantations for headaches is in preparation for publication).

The first incantation in the monograph is called "Amar-Suen's Headache" – HS 2438, Ni 2187: (Figure 1)

The headache (-demon) is directed towards the man,

the headache-demon is set to distress the neck muscles.

There is no small *opening* which can ensnare the galla-demon,

no binding can be tied on the headache(-demon).

It is the young lad who is seized by the headache-demon,

it is the young maiden whose diseased neck twitches.

Asalluhi sent someone to his father Enki,

(saying), say to my father:

The headache (-demon) [is directed toward the man],

[it is set to] distress [the neck muscles].'

[Enki answered] his son,

'My son, what do you not know?'

'Why..., what can save him?'

(After) you have brought the purifying water, and you have poured fat of a pure cow, then let one rub (him) with that oil.'

Asalluhi son of Enki

May the headache-demon 'split the river bank' on (the patient's) cranium,

may (the demon) break up like a pot.

It is the incantation of Nin-girrimma.

It is the spell of Eridu, shrine of Enki.

The second incantation is called Namtar-demon vs. headaches – HS 1588+1596: (Figure 2)

In heaven the wind blows,

on earth the mice proliferate,

and Namtar inflicts headache.

In men's bodies is head beer, the south wind blows sag-duru on the (alluvial) land.

In the mountains, the south [wind] blows the scattered seed. He (the patient) put his

trust into (divine) standard.

Therefore, the gods of heaven were afraid, they came down from (lit.'in') heaven,

the gods of earth were afraid, and were standing around the grave,

the great gods themselves made (funerary) offerings.

The fish in the river were afraid, and left their habitat,

the birds in the heaven were afraid, and smashed into the base of the mountains.

The undomesticated animals, creatures of the steppe and wild animals suffered

from catalepsy [a disease of domestic animals].

Šakan was afraid and retired to the horizon,

Nanna was afraid, and retired to the height of heaven.

Asalluhi came to his father Enki,

and he said,

'My son, what don't you know? What can be added to it?'

The *god reconciled* the sick man towards the steppe.

Purify ... [in a pure] place,

take of the pen and sheepfold which is not abandoned,

choose a ... lamb,

choose ... a black² goat.

DISCUSSION

Both incantations follow the same standard medical incantation formula – "Problem, Dialogue and Ritual Solution."⁹ The problem is first described. Then Asalluhi presents the problem to his father, the god Enki, who offers the therapeutic regimen for the problem. The first incantation is better preserved

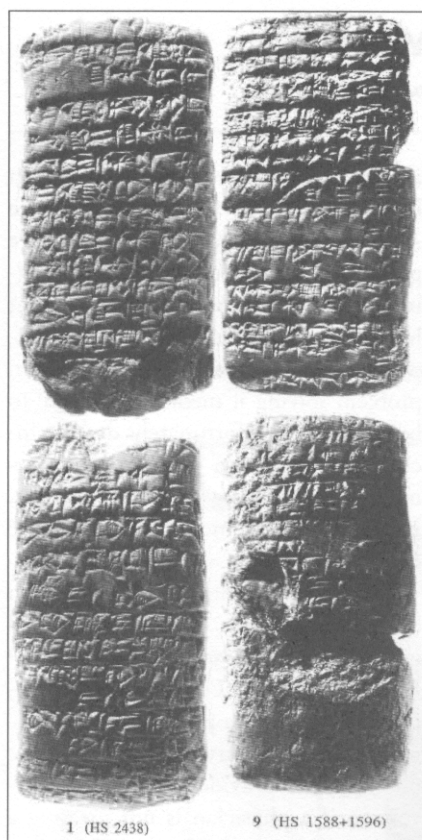


Figure 1

Figure 2

revealing a recommendation to apply topical purified water *mixed in the "fat of pure cow"*.

The end of the second incantation is, unfortunately, fragmentary. However, the literary value of the second incantation is obvious. The text reveals an apocalyptic vision of the distress caused by the demon Namtar inflicting the headache. Even the gods were afraid of the demon Namtar: they lowered themselves for funerary offerings. Various interpretations of the text and translation analysis are offered in this scholarly monograph. To briefly explain some of the names mentioned in the incantations: Amar-Suen (2047-2038 BC) (the patient in the first incantation) is the third ruler of Ur III state. Nanna is the god of the moon. Nin-girimma is a deity whose role is unclear. She is frequently invoked in the therapeutic incantations of this period. She is also associated with water, fish and serpents. Šakan or Šakkan (in Akkadian, Sumequan) is the deity protecting wild animals. Eridu is a Sumerian city. Namtar is the demon of the nether regions, harbinger of death. The same name was given to a minor deity who acted as a minister of Ereškigal, queen of the underworld.⁵

There is only one previous Sumerian written mention of headaches in the epic poem *Enki and Ninbursag*.² The two lines are: (In Heaven) "the sick-eyed says not 'I am sick-eyed'/the sick-headed (says) not 'I am sick-headed'". The description of the headache in the first incantation offers a more detailed picture of the headache including the "distress the neck muscles". The unrelenting nature of the headache and blowing motif is reminiscent of the more recent Mesopotamian incantation: "Headache rometh over the desert, blowing like the wind..." (Frequently, the age of this particular incantation is mentioned as 3000BC. The primary source of this quotation is *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* by R. C. Thompson (3). He states that the documents "were drawn up ...about the first half of the seventh century before Christ". He speculates, however, about possible previous recensions of "not less than six thousand years old").

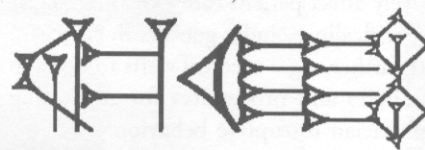
It is not entirely clear whether these texts describe a primary headache disorder or a secondary headache due to a catastrophic intracranial process (e.g. infectious or hemorrhagic). Other sources regarding Mesopotamian medicine reveal that medical practitioners were familiar with "continuous" as well as recurrent headaches.⁸

One of the approaches toward these texts is to see them in the light of today's medical paradigm. It is tempting to label these headaches with current medical terminology as a particular type of headache as some authors do. These translations are imperfect, frequently leading to a scholastic discourse and disagreement among the Sumerologists. The tablets are often fragmentary, cryptic and poorly preserved. Usually, this leads to an unsuccessful search of the pharmaco-therapeutic effects of the ingredients used in the ritual ("pure cow" and "purifying water" in this case). Another approach is to analyze these as a part of magical medicine with diseases caused by demons and gods. Yet another approach is to view this as a literary document inspired by certain events, or as *medico-poetics*.

It is tempting to label these incantations as the *first* recorded descriptions of headache treatment (either magical or therapeutic). Therapeutic options for headaches are also present in Ancient Egyptian papyri. The oldest Papyrus Ramesseum III is dated 1800 BC (4). However, both sources—Egyptian papyri and Sumerian clay tablets—are the copies of even older

documents (possibly, as far as 3rd millennium BC). Therefore, the exact age of the original texts remains unclear. Within the limitations of the dating of the sources available, this is the first description of headache therapy. As it has been noted by S.N.Kramer in his comments on another Sumerian pharmacopoeia tablet, the exact proportions of the ingredients were not mentioned.⁶ This, he speculates, could be due to the desire of the medical practitioner to protect the trade secret from either the lay public or from his colleagues.

As the first people to develop writing, along with many other "firsts,"⁶ Sumerians provided us with a first written word for a headache—"sag-gig" (below in the cuneiform).⁷



ABBREVIATIONS

HS – (Frau-Professor-) Hilprecht-Sammlung.

Ni – Museum siglum of the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul (Nippur).

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CORRESPONDENCE

Vlad Zayas, MD
450 Veterans Memorial Parkway, Bldg 11
East Providence, RI 02914
E-mail: Vladislav_Zayas@brown.edu