*Pīmūti*: A Ugaritism in the *Hymn to Marduk* from Ugarit?

The *Hymn to Marduk* is a fragmentary Akkadian text from Ugarit that probably belongs to the local scribal school curricula. The Babylonian provenance of the *Hymn* is evinced by its addressee Marduk, and by the close affinity of some of its themes and phrases to the later Babylonian composition *Ludlul bel nēmeqi*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless, scholars have commented on the presence of some West-Semitic features in this text, which might attest to a local revision.

For example, while it is difficult to ascertain whether the verb *utabbikanni* in l. 37 derives from the Akkadian root *t-b-k*, the West-Semitic root *d-b-q* better fits the context,[[2]](#footnote-2) as it bears the opposite meaning of the previous verb *uparriranni*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This meaning is in line with the stylistic formation of the text: “He dispersed me (but) join me together.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Similarly, whereas an Akkadian derivation of the verb *arrasu* in l. 22 has yet to be suggested, its derivation from the West-Semitic root *r-z-y* (in the N-conjugation) suits the context well: “I am wasting away from the disease…”[[5]](#footnote-5) In addition, the verb *išmuṭanni* in l. 36 is difficult to make sense of in this context according to an Akkadian derivation[[6]](#footnote-6) and might derive from the West-Semitic verb *š-m-ṭ*, ‘to drop’, or *ṣ-m-t*, “to destroy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Phonetically, the prohibitive *lātabayyaš* in l. 32, “do not be shame,” testifies to a local declension of the verb *bâšu* instead of the common Akkadian *lātabâš/tab’’aš*.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, the spelling *pakrat* in l. 9, rather than *paḫrat*, might be affected by the local pronunciation of a weak *kaf*.[[9]](#footnote-9) In light of these Western-Semitic linguistic features in a hymn of Babylonian origin that was found at Ugarit, I would like to focus on additional possible local features embodied in this text.

Line 40 in the *Hymn to Marduk* may be considered linguistically as “good Akkadian.” Nevertheless, it contains a unique phrase, *pīmūti*, which is usually translated as “mouth of death,” as in Cohen’s translation, whose edition is the most recent to be published:[[10]](#footnote-10)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 39'He threw me down but raised me up, |  |  |
| 40'He saved me from death’s mouth (*pīmūti*), |  |  |
| 41'He raised me from the netherworld. |  |  |

Perhaps because *pīmūti* has no additional attestation in Mesopotamian literature,[[11]](#footnote-11) Oshima– following Neugayrol – suggested interpreting this phrase in light of a much more common Akkadian expression, *pīkarašê* (literally, “mouth of annihilation”), occurring in the *Prayer for Marduk no. 1* and other compositions.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to Oshima, like the figurative meaning suggested for *pīkarašê*, so should *pīmūti* be understood as a metaphor for a grave, and figuratively as the “mouth” of Death.

However, for the Ugaritians as well as for their neighbour cultures, the literal meaning of *pīmūti* was familiar. Among the West-Semitic cultures, the term *mūtu* not only has the abstract meaning ‘death’, but also serves as the appellation of the lord of the netherworld Mot (“Death”; *mt* in Ugaritic alphabetical spelling; *mu-tu* in syllabic Akkadian spelling from Ugarit;[[13]](#footnote-13) מות in biblical Hebrew spelling), whose most prominent characteristic is his hunger and eagerness to swallow the living through his mouth (*p* in the Ugaritic alphabetical spelling; פה in biblical Hebrew spelling). This is deduced from several verses set in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (*KTU* 1.4 VII 47-52; VIII 14-20; 1.5 I 6-8; 12-22; II 2-6; 1.6 II 13-23; VI 19-25) as well as in biblical literature (Hab 2:5; Isa 5:14; Prov 30: 15-16; Ps 141:7). In what follows, two citations from each corpus will be used to illustrate [complete the sentence with what they will illustrate].

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle cites Baal’s warning to his servant to keep his distance from Mot, lest the latter take him like a lamb in his mouth (*p*):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | 14“But be careful, |
|  | 15messenger of the gods. Do not |
|  | 16get close to the son of El |
|  | 17Mot, lest he takes you |
|  | 18like a lamb in his mouth, |
|  | 19like a kid in the opening |
|  | 20of his maw. You will be crushed.” |

And Mot himself is proud of his endless appetite and enormous throat (*npš*):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 12Message of son of El |  |
| 13Mot, word of El’s beloved, |  |
| 14the hero: “my throat is (huge as) the throat of a lion |  |
| 15in the wasteland, and (as) the gullet of a ‘snorter’ |  |
| 16in the sea, and (as) a pool (for which) |  |
| 17the wild bulls reach, (and as) a spring (for) the herd of deer. |  |
| 18And indeed, indeed, my throat swallows |  |
| 19heaps (of things); and indeed, with both |  |
| 20my hands I eat, the seven |  |
| 21portions of mine are in a bowl, and (my) cup mixes |  |
| 22a river…” |  |

In the biblical corpus, good examples of [what? insert word] are Hab 2:5 and Isa 5:14, where Mot and his female equivalent Sheol, the netherworld, are mentioned as a simile of greed, due to their wide throat (נפש) and mouth (פה):[[14]](#footnote-14)

|  |
| --- |
| Hab 2:5Who has open his throat as wide as Sheol, who is as insatiable as Mawt. |
| Isa 5:14Assuredly, Sheol has opened wide her throat, and parted her mouth in a measureless gape; and down into her shall go, that splendor and tumult. |

In light of this common Western-Semitic view of Mot (“Death”) as a hungry figure, and of the absence of such a view in contemporaneous Mesopotamian texts (as far as is currently known), *pīmūti* might be considered an ugaritism.[[15]](#footnote-15) The scribe who copied the Babylonian *Hymn to Marduk* into Ugaritic inserted this phrase as an equivalent of the netherworld, together with additional linguistic and phonetic features of Western-Semitic origin.[[16]](#footnote-16)

1. Due to this affinity, it was even argued that the *Hymn to Marduk* might be an old-Babylonian version of a forerunner to the later *Ludlul*; see…. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Von Soden 1969, 191 who suggests both interpretations. In favor of western-Semitic derivation see... In favor of Akkadian derivation, see… Arnaud 2007, 111, 114 reads: *utabbilanni*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Its derivation from *p-r-r* might be according to Akkadian or West-Semitic roots. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dietrich, ibid, assumes a haplography of the conjugation *u* before *udabbikanni*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. von Soden 1969, 191, citing Isa 17:4 “ומשמן בשרו ירזה” in this relation. In contrast, George, *apud* Cohen 2013, 170 suggests the reading:*ar-ṣú-*˹*un*!˺, ”I yelled out loud,” while Cohen 2013 views this lemma as an “obscure item,” thus denying its West-Semitic origin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CAD Š2 309a suggests “extricated(?) me.” Cohen 2013, 169 translates it as “tore” in italic script. Dietrich 2012 suggests reading *iṣmudanni* with a derivation of a?/the? Western-Semitic root. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the latter suggestion, cf. also Dietrich 2012, 211 with a similar view. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ... [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. von Soden 1989, followed by Oshima 2011, 212, who read ḪU as *pak*. Huehnegard 1989 suggested instead to reconstruct the lemma as <*pu*>-*ḫu*-*rat*. In addition, Oshima ibid suggested reading the unexpected sign GI in l. 12, as *ḫi* (in *ḫilṣu*) and the local mispronunciation of Akkadian *ḫilṣu* as *ġilṣu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ... [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Note that while the phrase “KA *mūti*” occurs in *CAD* P, 471a below the entry *pīmūti*, the ideogram KA should be normalized as *rigmu*; see ibid and *CAD* R, s.v.*rigmu*. A different view, regarding the fear that if the netherworld gates would be opened, the dead would emerge and consume the living, is embedded in later Akkadian works: *Ištar’s Descent, Gilgameš*, and *Nergal and Ereškigal*. For the demon d*mūtu* in *The Underworld Vision of a Prince* from the first millennium BCE and in additional occurrences, none of them fits the context of ll. 40’-41’ in the *Hymn to Marduk*.See Sibbing-Plantholt 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The semi-equivalent lines in *Ludlul* V are broken, hence they cannot be of assistance (the translation and transliteration follow Oshima 2014, 106):

    |  |  |
    | --- | --- |
    |  | 5He saved me [from …] |
    |  | 6[He picked] me up [from …] |
    |  | 7He ra[ised] me [from …] |
    |  | 8He dragged me out from the Hubur-river. |

    Cf. also the introduction in *Ludlul* I 13-14 (following Oshima 2014, 79-80):

    |  |  |
    | --- | --- |
    | 13The one by whose rage burial chambers’ *doors are thrown wide* (lit.: open up), |  |
    | 14(but) at the same time, he raises the fallen man from annihilation. |  |

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Note, however, that as a god, the name Mutu in syllabic Ugaritic has not been found. In one broken god list, it is written with the ideogram NAM.ÚŠ. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See further discussion in... [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Therefore, the view that “the motif of death’s insatiable appetite is well attested throughout the Near East” (Smith and Pitard 2009 do you need a page number?), which is based on the presumption that the *Hymn to Marduk* is a version of the Babylonian *Ludlul*, must be denied. On the contrary, this occurrence should be enumerated with the Ugaritic and biblical occurrences evincing a unique Western-Semitic feature. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A similar phenomenon occurs in El Amarna letters originating from Canaan. For examples in further Akkadian texts from Ugarit, compare the reference to the Akkadian male god Šamaš as a female in legal texts, and to the Hurrian male god as a female in a letter from the king of Carchemish to Niqmaddu King of Ugarit, both affected by the feminine identification of the Ugaritic Sun-goddess. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)