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

The *Hymn to Marduk* is a fragmentary Akkadian text from Ugarit that was probably part of the curriculum in which local scribes were trained. 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-2) Nevertheless, scholars have noted the presence of some West-Semitic features in this text, which might attest to a local revision.

For example, while an attempt to derive the verb *utabbikanni* in l. 37 from the Akkadian root *t-b-k* does not make sense in the context, the West-Semitic root *d-b-q* is more appropriate[[2]](#footnote-3) as it bears the opposite meaning of the previous verb *uparriranni*.[[3]](#footnote-4) Together, both verbs are in line with the stylistic formulation of the text: “He dispersed me (but) joined me together.”[[4]](#footnote-5) 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) is suitable: “I am wasting away from the disease…”[[5]](#footnote-6) In addition, as scholars have referred to the doubtful meaning of the verb *išmuṭanni* (l. 36) in its context[[6]](#footnote-7); a derivation from the West-Semitic verb *š-m-ṭ*, “to drop”, or even *ṣ-m-t*, “to destroy,” may be a good fit[[7]](#footnote-8) Phonetically, the prohibitive *lātabayyaš* in l. 32, “do not come to shame,” testifies to a local declension of the verb *bâšu* rather than to the common Akkadian *lātabâš/ tab’’aš*.[[8]](#footnote-9) Moreover, the spelling *pakrat* in l. 9, rather than *paḫrat*, might be affected by the local pronunciation of a weak *kaf*.[[9]](#footnote-10) In light of these possible West-Semitic linguistic features in a hymn of Babylonian origin that was found at Ugarit, I would like to examine an additional phrase that is probably of local, West-Semitic origin.

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-11):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 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-12) 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-13) According to Oshima, like the figurative meaning suggested for *pīkarašê*, so should *pīmūti* be understood as a metaphor for a grave, and not literally as “the mouth of Death.”

However, for the Ugaritians, as well as for their neighbouring cultures, the literal meaning of *pīmūti* was well-known. Among the West-Semitic cultures, the term *mūtu* not only has the concrete 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-14) 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; Prov30: 15-16; Ps141:7). In the following, two citations from each corpus will clarify the local context of this phrase.

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle relates Baal’s warning to his servant to keep his distance from Mot, lest the latter takes 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 the 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, Hab 2:5 and Isa 5:14 are good illustrations of how Mot and his female equivalent Sheol, the netherworld, served as a simile of greed due to their wide throat (נפש) and mouth (פה):[[14]](#footnote-15)

|  |
| --- |
| Hab 2:5 Who has opened 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 West-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 a ugaritism.[[15]](#footnote-16) The local scribe, while copying the Babylonian *Hymn to Marduk* at Ugarit, apparently rephrased an unpreserved-now Akkadian terminology into) *pī mūti*  as an equivalent of the netherworld, together with additional linguistic and phonetic features of West-Semitic origin.[[16]](#footnote-17)

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-2)
2. Cf. Von Soden 1969, 191 who suggests both interpretations. For a view in favor of the West-Semitic derivation see... For one in favor of the Akkadian derivation, see… Arnaud 2007, 111, 114 reads: *utabbilanni*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Its derivation from *p-r-r* might be according to Akkadian or West-Semitic roots. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Dietrich, ibid, assumes a haplography of the conjugation *u* before *udabbikanni*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Cf. von Soden 1969, 191, citing Isa 17:4 “ומשמן בשרו ירזה” in this relation. In contrast, George, *apud* Cohen 2013, 170 suggeststhe 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-6)
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 West-Semitic root. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For the latter suggestion, cf. also Dietrich 2012, 211 with a similar view. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. ... [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Cf. von Soden 1989, followed by Oshima 2011, 212, who read ḪU as *pak*. Huehnegard 1989 suggested instead reconstructing 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-10)
10. ... [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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*. For the demon d*mūtu* in *The Underworld Vision of a Prince* of the first millennium BCE, and in additional references, none of them fits the context of ll. 40’-41’ in the *Hymn to Marduk* (See Sibbing-Plantholt 2021). Perhaps the more accurate view of the phrase *pī mūti* in Akkadian texts relates to the fear that if the netherworld gates would be opened, the dead (people) would consume the living (cf., *Ištar’s Descent, Gilgameš*, and *Nergal and Ereškigal*). This, however, is still very far from the context of the present text. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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-13)
13. Note, however, that as a god, the name Mutu in syllabic Akkadian has not been found in Ugarit. In one broken god list, it is written with the ideogram NAM.ÚŠ. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See further discussion in... [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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 West-Semitic feature. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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-17)