

From the Four Corners of the Earth

Studies in Iconography and Cultures
of the Ancient Near East
in Honour of F. A. M. Wiggermann

Edited by David Kertai
and Olivier Nieuwenhuys

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FERMENTING VAT, CHILDBIRTH AND DRECKAPOTHEKE

A SCHOOL INCANTATORY-MEDICAL TABLET

Markham Geller (Freie Universität Berlin) and
Luděk Vacín (University of Hradec Králové)

Introduction

As a contribution to this volume, we present a school incantatory-medical tablet (Figs. 1-2). The tablet is a rare example of Old Babylonian magic and medicine in both Sumerian and Akkadian on a single piece of clay. The format suggests a school context, since the tablet is an imgida type of exercise, long and narrow, single-column, inscribed on both sides with 54 (indented) lines of text containing line rulings (not included in the handcopy).¹ The script is robust but neat, with well impressed wedges and most of the signs carefully formed.²

However, there are some idiosyncrasies, e.g. the form of the signs MU, TUR (in ll. 31, 34) and HI (in l. 52). The latter two signs have a vertical wedge appended to their usual OB form. The tablet also exhibits some unusual spellings, notably the reverse order of signs in one of the moon-god's names used (Nanna written ^dKI.ŠEŠ instead of ^dŠEŠ.KI in l. 36), the writing of the incantation goddess' name (^dNin-HA.A.KUD), and the spelling of the Akkadian words *ṭābu* and *nezû* in lines 51-52 (*ṭa-ab-a* instead of the expected *ṭa-a-ba*; *ne-ez-e* instead of *ne-zu*). All this points to an Old Babylonian school as this tablet's place of origin.

The content of the tablet seems to show that the purpose of the exercise was to reproduce (from memory) different types of short texts or perhaps excerpts from larger incantatory-medical collections.

The first incantation in this small group is directed against gall, although it is quite unlike previous texts known under this heading.³ If the present interpretation is correct, the idea appears to be that after the first three lines written in a poetic manner the 'gall', like poison, is blamed for disturbing the preparation of food and drink, since it has ruined the neck and opening of the gakkul-fermenting vat, while at the same time causing everything in the oven to burn. This could also potentially be a metaphor for childbirth.

The second text is about gall in relation to childbirth, likewise not very similar to known gall incantations. It appears to blame the gall for affecting the hair and breasts of a pregnant woman, causing *samanu*-disease as a result, and thus putting both the woman and her child in grave danger. The text also opens with a poetic introduction comparing the pregnant woman (or her womb) to a pure building, a temple of the Universe disturbed by the malign gall. Several deities are then called to assist in the treatment, which seems to consist of inducing (premature) delivery combined with the invocation of those gods to whose benevolent hands the patient (the lady, her child or both) is eventually commended.

The very unusual Akkadian medical text appended to the Sumerian incantations (after a double ruling) deals with several internal diseases and seems to have

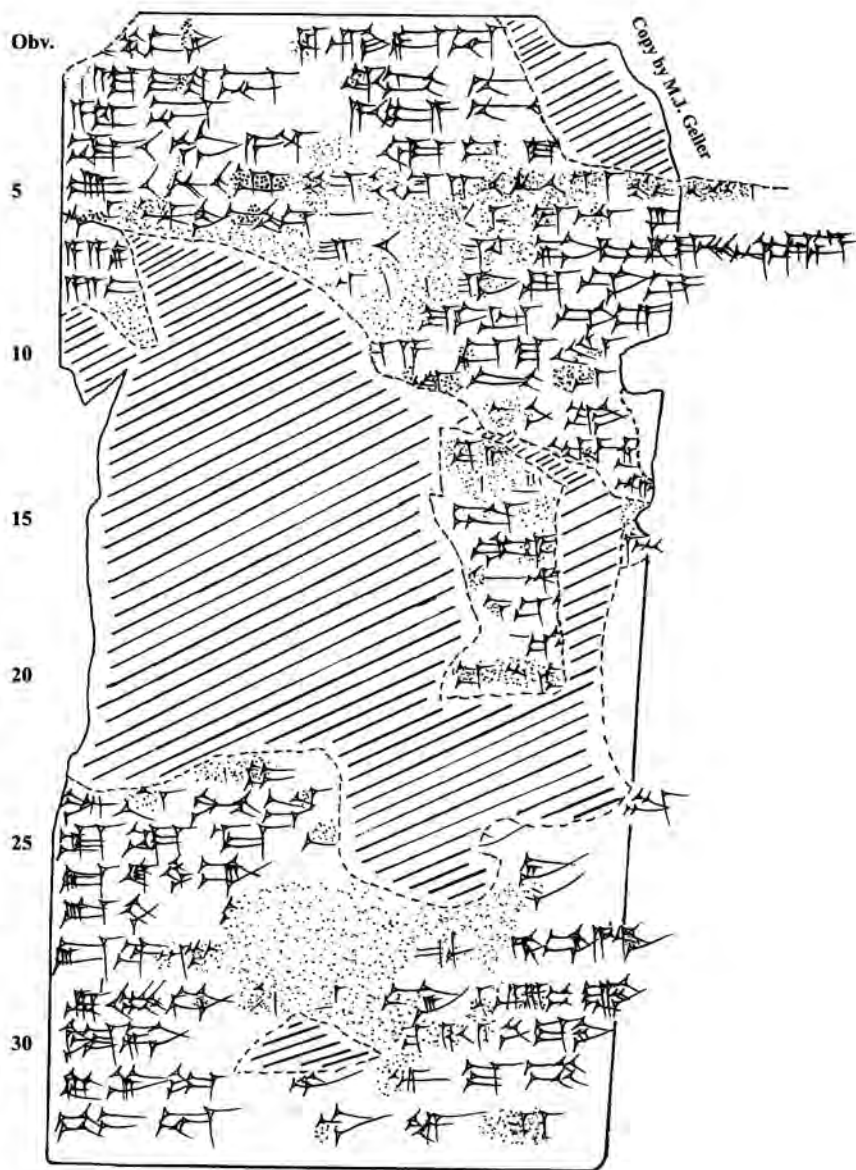


Fig. 1

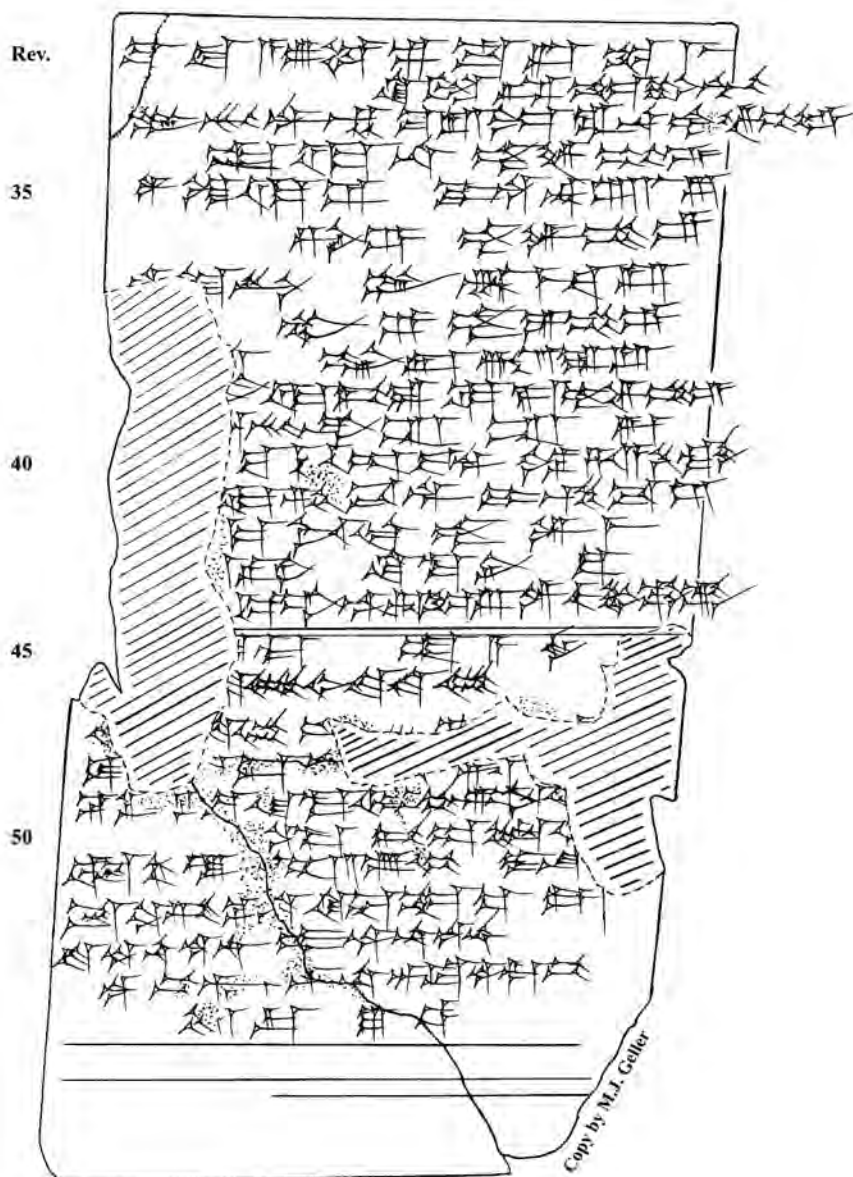


Fig. 2

no discernible relation to the preceding lines except the generic one (medicine in the broadest sense of the word). Thus it might have been recalled by the apprentice scribe simply to fill up the space and round off his exercise tablet. Actually, the total number of lines on this tablet reaches the maximum limit usual for this format of OB school extracts (50-60 lines).⁴

As for the relationship of the two Sumerian texts inscribed on this tablet, the only reason for including them apart from their genre (gall incantations) seems to be the mention of a vessel used in beer brewing in one of them and the beer goddess in the other. The first text without a human patient mentions the fermenting vat, also invoked in the initial lines of the ‘Drinking Song’ dedicated to Ninkasi,⁵ whom we find in the therapeutic section of the next incantation dealing with childbirth. On the other hand, a fermenting vat could also be a metaphor (in school contexts) for the womb, while Ninkasi appears to assume the role of a midwife in the second incantation (see also comments to l. 35 below).

In view of such subtle inter-textual references, it is no surprise to find puns, wordplay and perhaps even rebus writing in the second text of this tablet, which is another indication of its school context. The childbirth incantation-treatment text clearly plays on the phonetic value of the signs TUR (small) and TÙR (cattle-pen) in references to the child, his mother’s womb (l. 34) and the domain of the moon-god, ‘Lord of the Cattle-Pen’, the patron of cows, in a transferred meaning also of (pregnant) women. The moon-god’s prominent role in the healing process is made crystal clear by mentioning him by his three different names (Sin, Nanna and Ašimbabbar; admittedly, the third is almost wholly restored), followed by different titles (my lord, Lord of *āšipūtu* and Lord of the Cattle-Pen). The use of rebus writing in a reference to the sick lady’s womb (KA = $p\hat{i}$ = $p\hat{i}_4$ + SAG for /pisan/),⁶ if indeed correctly interpreted here, would conclude the little set of puns in this text nicely.

This text is dedicated to our friend and colleague Frans Wiggermann, with whom we would have liked to have read the tablet and who probably has other ideas about how it should be understood.

Transliteration

- 1 [g]ú-bi ní-gge pisan-gim [.....]
- 2 ‘a¹ íd-da(text: Á)-gim ba-du₇ nu-[du₁₀-ga]
- 3 a pú-gim a-ge₆-a nu-d[u₁₀-ga]
- 4 ka gakkul₃-ám sag-gá dab₅-[dab₅]
- 5 ú udun-‘ke₄ sar-sar¹ a ‘udun-ke₄ sar-sar¹
- 6 ‘^dasal¹-lú-hi-‘e igi¹ ba-‘an¹-gar
- 7 a-a-ni [‘^den-ki-r]a ig[‘i-šè] ‘ba-an¹-ta-gen gù mu-na-dé-e
- 8 a-a-g[á] x ‘ba¹-ni-ib-bé-e
- 9 [.....] ba-ni-ib-bé-e
- 10 [.....]-x-a é ba-te
- 11 [.....]-x-bi-‘šè¹
- 12 [.....]-‘gi₄-gi₄¹
- 13 [.....] ba-‘ni¹-[da-a]b-p[‘à-dè]
- 14 [.....] x x [.....] x

15 [.....] DU [.....]
 16 [..... mu]-ub-¹è¹-[d]è-eš
 17 [.....] x-an-x-[....]
 18 [.....] x giš x [.....]
 19 [.....] giš x
 20 [.....] ba-an-da[gal(?)]
 21 [.....]
 22 [.....]
 23 [.....] x ¹tur¹ [.....]
 24 tu₁₅-¹gin₇¹gu-du-[a-ni-ta hé-em-ma-ra]-du
 25 ka-inim-ma z[é-a-ka]m
 26 é ki kù-ga [.....]-ni
 27 é-šár-r[a-n]i
 28 é ba-an-k[u₄ munus-r]a ¹gi¹-ga-àm-<<kam>>
 29 siki gig-ga ¹gig⁷¹-ga ¹ubur⁷¹-ra-kam
 30 nin-bi [^dn]in-¹girim_x¹(HA.A.KUD)-ma-kam
 31 šà lú-tur ¹hé-em¹-ma-du₈
 32 ninda-gim ¹hé¹-em-¹tu¹

rev.

33 ba-dul a ^unaga⁷-si-da-ke₄ bí-lá ki-sikil-la bí-in-búr
 34 lugal-mu ^dsuen-ke₄ tur-ra-na hé-em-du₈-e pisan_x(PI₄.SAG)-na hé-em-du₈-e
 35 ^dnin-ka-si dumu ^den-lil-lá-ke₄ gi-e hé-em-du₈-e
 36 ^dnanna¹ (text: ^dKI.ŠEŠ¹) lugal nam-išib-ba-ke₄ dim-e hé-em-du₈-e
 37 [^daš-im-babb]ar lugal ^étùr-ra-ke₄
 38 [^dnin-hu]r-sag ga-ra sag-gá hé-em-du₈-e
 39 [.....] x mu-bi šid-šid-de₅
 40 [^dab]-ba-šú-šú ab-ba ^dnin-girim_x(HA.A.KUD)-ma-kam⁸
 41 [dumu]-sag zi-da ^ddumu-zi-da-ke₄
 42 [lú-ra s]ag-nim silim hé-em-lá
 43 [lú-ùl]u-bi silim-ma-ni-šè
 44 [šu š]a₆-ga dingir-re-ne-ke₄ im-ši-in-gi₄-gi₄

45 [ka-ini]m-ma zé-a-kam
 46 [šum-ma Š]Ā.GIG LIPIŠ.ŠĀ.GIG
 47 h[i-ip-Š]Ā.GIG i[š]-¹tu¹ [...] x
 48 SU [...] ¹ša¹-bit x x ri [x]
 49 e-¹ru NINDA-šu¹ ki-ma ši-i-bi ina si-li-¹'¹-[ti GIG]
 50 [š]um-ma qá-ab-li G[IG]
 51 UŠ₁₁-sa la ¹ta¹-ab-a ú-ul i-šu-[ú]
 52 iṭ-hi ze-e na-qí-dím ne-ez-e
 53 ŠĀ an-na-an-na DUMU an-na-an-na
 54 DINGIR gaš-ri an-na-an-ma ^dINNIN.BI li-ib-lu-ut

Translation***‘Gall’ in the ‘kitchen’***

- 1 Something [*has made*] its rim like a basket,
 2 it perforates like the waters of a river – it does no [good],
 3 like well water in a flood – it does no good.
 4 The opening of the fermenting vat on top is affected,
 5 the herbs in the oven are burned, sauces in the oven are boiled away.
 6 Asalluhi looked into it,
 7 he appeared before his father [Enki] and speaks to him:
 8 “My father ...,” that is what he says,
 9 that is what he says,
 10 approaches the house,
 11 to its ...,
 12 [Enki] responds
 13 he invokes it with him,
 14-15 (too broken for a translation)
 16 they brought it out,
 17-19 (too broken for a translation)
 20 he extended
 21-23 (too broken for a translation)
 24 [let it] come [out from its] rear like wind.
 25 it is an incantation against gall / poison.

Gall in childbirth

- 26 In the “house, a holy place”, her [.....]
 27 in the “house of the Universe”, her [.....]
 28 entered the house causing illness to the [woman(?)],
 29 (namely) unhealthy hair and disease of the breast.
 30 Their mistress Ningirimma –
 31 so that the child should open up the belly,
 32 so that she should give birth like a seed-funnel –
 rev.
 33 she (Ningirimma) has stretched out a mat with juice of ‘horned alkali’,
 she spread it over a pure place.

Treatment

- 34 Let my lord Sin ,make an opening in her *narrowness*, let him make an
 opening in her *box*,
 35 let Ninkasi, daughter of Enlil, make an opening with a reed-tool,
 36 let Nanna, master of *āšipūtu*, make an opening with a pin;
 37 [Let Ašimbabbar] lord of the cattle-pen
 38 (or) Ninhursag spread cream on top.
 39 [As for these gods], their names are to be recited.
 40 It is Kilili in the window, (i.e.) Ningirimma,

41 the rightful first-born daughter of Dumuzi,
 42 who may cure [the patient's] *samanu*-disease.
 43 As for the recovery of the patient,
 44 he/she is to be commended to the benevolent hands of the gods.

=====

45 It is an incantation against gall.
 46 If internal-disease, the *kīs libbi*-disease ("heartburn"),
 47 the *hīp libbi*-disease ("heartbreak") from ...,
 48 the body ... seized ...,
 49 (and) he vomits his meals like *šibu*-disease, it is *sili 'tu*-fever.
 50 If loin-disease
 51 but he does not have his mucous being unpleasant,
 52 *he applies* the voided excrement of the herdsman.
 53 (As for) the 'heart' of So-and-So, son of So-and-So,
 54 let any such powerful god and goddess heal it.

Commentary

- ¹ The ‘something’ which makes the neck of the fermenting vat appear like a basket (perforated with holes) is presumably the ‘gall’ or poison; *martu* is synonymous with *imtu*, denoting both saliva and the poison dripping from the fingers of demons. Cf. Utukkū Lemnūtu (UH 12: 18), referring to the Utukku-demon: umbin-bi zé-ta bi-iz-bi-iz-za-bi giri-bi uš₁₁-hul-a // *ina šuprišu martu ittanattuk kibis imta lemuttu*, ‘gall drips from his (Utukku’s) fingernails, his tread his harmful poison’.
- ²⁻³ Cf. CT 17, 10: 53-54, zé-šè ba-an-ku₄ a ugu-bi nu-un-du₁₀ // *ana marti ittūr mû elišu ul ṭābu*, ‘(Asakku-illness) turns into gall, the water (poured) over him was not beneficial.’ (There is no modern edition available of this Asakkū Maršūtū incantation). Note the orthography of Ningirrimma’s name, in which the signs A and HA have been reversed, as is the case with the writing of Nanna’s name in l. 36. This spelling of Ningirrimma’s name is otherwise attested only in CT 44, 30: 25 (see Krebern timer 2000: 363).
- ⁵ Cf. Alster 1997: 304 (3N-T 242): é lú-ka im-šu-rin-na na-an-sar-re / ninda-bi i-bí ‘TAR’; don’t cause the oven in a man’s house to smoke. The smoke will... the bread.
- ⁶⁻⁷ These lines are variant of the Enki-Asalluhi (Ea-Marduk) formula, which usually reads ^dasal-lú-hi igi im-ma-an-si a-a-ni ^den-ki-ra é-a ba-an-ši-in-ku₄ gù mu-un-na-dé; see, for example, Geller 1985: 180-181.
- ²⁴ This line has been restored after Alster 1972: 350, l. 20, and see the interesting variant to this line in Van Dijk 1971: no. 1 rev. 12, which reads ní-te ní-te-a hé-ni-du-zé-en. See also Michalowski 1981: 16, l. 18.
- ²⁵ See Alster 1972: 350, l. 21.
- ³² An alternative translation would be ‘like a breeding bull’ (ninda), although the simile is not clear; cf. Stol 2000: 61.
- ³³ For bandul, see PSD B: 16. The writing in our text (ba-dul) can be understood as a misspelling.
- ³⁴ The sign /pisan/ (PI₄.SAG) is a graphic pun for ‘chief opening’ (ka sag), in this case a metaphor for the vagina, but *pisannu* can refer to a part of the body, cf. *pisan appi*, ‘nasal passage’, CAD P: 423.
- ³⁵ Cf. Stol 1993: 115 [ref. courtesy U. Steinert], in which Stol comments on the line in At-rahasis I 282: [i]h[?]-lu-up pa-le-e si-li-tam ip-te, (the midwife) slipped in the *palû* and opened the womb’ (see ibid. n. 30). Stol also refers to Jacobsen’s note (1973: 290 n.63) that *palû* could derive from Sum. bala, a spindle or rod (see PSD B: 64f.), which would then require the verb *halāpu* to have a transitive meaning here, ‘(the midwife) slipped the rod in and opened the womb’, which would then be an interesting parallel to our line.
- ³⁷ A tigi to Nanna-Suen refers to him as lugal tūr kù-ga in l. 33; see Sjöberg 1973: 36-40.
- ³⁸ Note W. Sallaberger’s comments on the meaning of the verb du₈ in ll. 13 and 15 of the Ninkasi hymn – “abdichten, massieren, aufhäufen” – the latter two of which would correspond to the use of du₈ in our line (Sallaberger 2012: 301). One may alternatively read, hu]r-sag-gá(!)-ra and translate the line as, ‘open up the top for Ninhursag (the mother goddess)’.
- ⁴⁰ For the Kilili demoness who ‘leans out of the window’ (ab-ba-šû-šû), cf. Farber 1977: 79. Significantly, Ningirrimma takes over the role of Inana in the present incantation. The only attestations of ab-ba-šû-šû (Kilili), according to PSD A/2: 143 ‘a demonic attendant of Inanna’, in OB literature are Inana and Šukaletuda, ll. 190-191 (repeated in ll. 202-203):

ab-ba-šú-šú inim-kúr-du₁₁-du₁₁ ad-gi₄-gi₄[...] / 7 'a¹-[r]á 7 an-eden-na mu-un-da-su₈-¹su₈¹-[ge-eš] (Volk 1995: 121), and Ninegala hymn, l. 106: ^dgidim-ab-ba-šú-šú-ka ma-ra-ni-in-ku₄-ku₄-dè-en (Behrens 1998: 34). Important is the equation of ^dab-ba-šú-šú with Kilili in god-lists, except for An = *Anum* IV where she is the first of the '18 messengers of Inana'. See Lambert 1982: 209 (comm. to II 18-19 of the hymn). This 'goddess who looks out of the window' is also mentioned in Šurpu III 78 (see Reiner 1958: 56).

⁴² For samana-disease affecting suckling babies, and mother's milk transferring the samana-disease cf. Finkel 1998: 88, l. 17; 90, n. 32.

⁴³⁻⁴⁴ This doxology occurs frequently in Utukkū Lemnūtu incantations, see UH 12: 142.

⁴⁶⁻⁵⁴ It is unexpected to have an Akk. medical text appended to Sum. incantations.

⁴⁶ This sequence of diseases is known from Utukkū Lemnūtu incantations, cf. UH 7: 4, ša-gig lipiš-gig // *muṣ libbi kīs libbi*, with *hīp libbi* known from other texts.

⁴⁹ The verb *e-ru* here is interpreted as from *arū* 'vomit' (CAD A/2: 316).

⁵² This form of Dreckapotheke is unattested but is similar to *zē malāhi*, 'sailor's shit'. The term *iṭ-hi* is uncertain but may be related to *ṭahū*, a term used in baking recipes (see CAD T: 45), or as *ṭehū*, cf. also CAD T: 78.

Abbreviations

CAD	The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago (Chicago: Oriental Institute Chicago).
CT	Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum.
PSD	The Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.
UH	The Uduḡ-hul Series (<i>Utukkū Lemnūtu</i>) (Geller 2016).

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Notes

- ¹ For a recent study of school tablet formats see Delnero 2010.
- ² The tablet is in a private collection. This article was funded by the ERC project BabMed and the DFG Project BLMS (Bilinguals in Late Mesopotamian Scholarship).
- ³ See Michalowski 1981.
- ⁴ Delnero 2010: 55.
- ⁵ See Civil 1964: 70 and Civil's comments on the gakkul (ibid.: 83-84).
- ⁶ See Finkel 2009: 21-22 for a complex pun involving the wordplay of Sum. KA and Akk. *pû* likewise in a medical context.
- ⁷ The naga sign is written as a ligature in which IR is written inside SUM.
- ⁸ See l. 30 above.