

5) Nabû-zuqup-kenu, Gilgamesh XII, and the Rites of Du'uzu – On the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month Du'uzu (IV), 705, the Assyrian scribe and royal advisor Nabû-zuqup-kenu, a resident of the city of Kalḫu, wrote out the twelfth tablet of the epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>1</sup> In an article published in 1999,<sup>2</sup> I argued that the scribal activities he pursued on that day may have been motivated by news about the fate of the Assyrian king Sargon II, who had been killed, probably a little earlier, by Kulummaean enemy troops in Tabal in central Anatolia.<sup>3</sup> Gilgamesh XII contains a long dialogue in which Enkidu, briefly released from the Netherworld, instructs his friend Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, about the afterlife conditions of men. Its last lines read as follows :

(Gilgamesh :) “Did you see the one who was killed in battle?” (Enkidu :) “I saw (him). His father and mother honor his memory and his wife weeps over him.” “Did you see the one whose corpse was left lying in the open countryside?” “I saw (him). His ghost does not lie at rest in the Netherworld.” “Did you see the one whose ghost has no provider (of funerary offerings)?” “I saw (him). He eats the scrapings from the pot and crusts of bread that are thrown away in the street.”<sup>4</sup>

The death scenarios described in this passage are so strikingly similar to what happened to Sargon, whose body had been left unburied in enemy country,<sup>5</sup> that it seems plausible to assume that Nabû-zuqup-kenu was responding to the death of his king when he prepared his copy of Gilgamesh XII. But what was his intent when he wrote down the text? Pointing out that the vast majority of tablets from Nabû-zuqup-kenu's library are omen texts, I suggested in 1999 that the famous scribe studied Gilgamesh XII very much in the manner of a work of divination. I argued that the text, which classifies different ways to die and outlines their consequences, portended to him the conditions of Sargon's afterlife.

In his new edition of the epic of Gilgamesh, Andrew-George offers a different explanation for Nabû-zuqup-kenu's Gilgamesh studies. He suggests the scribe might have copied the text not so much for philosophical reasons as for practical ones. Referring to the rich evidence from Mesopotamia for offerings to appease ghosts and evil spirits, George asks : “Was there in the first millennium ... a festival at which such offerings were made to the ghosts of dead soldiers and others whose bodies were never recovered for proper burial? Could it have been that Tablet XII — or maybe the entire series of twelve tablets — was put to ritual use, sung or recited, for example, at funerals and in memorial cults? Was it perhaps performed at the funerals of kings?”<sup>6</sup>

There is indeed good evidence to assume that Nabû-zuqup-kenu copied Gilgamesh XII in connection with a ritual involving the dead. The matter is in fact quite simple: The 27<sup>th</sup> of Du'uzu, the date of Nabû-zuqup-kenu's copy, falls into the short period during which the Babylonians and Assyrians of the first millennium performed an annual ritual of mourning for the god Dumuzi/Tammuz, who was allowed to rise from the Netherworld and spend three days among the living before returning to the infernal abode that had become his dismal home. The festival, invoked in the last lines of the Akkadian myth known as “Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld,”<sup>7</sup> began with ritual preparations on the 26<sup>th</sup> of Du'uzu and ended on the 29<sup>th</sup> of the same month.<sup>8</sup> According to a letter from Nineveh, the 27<sup>th</sup> was the day of the “release” (*pašāru*) of Dumuzi, that is, the day when the god was able to leave the shadowy realm of the dead and walk again upon the earth.<sup>9</sup>

It does not require much imagination to find parallels between Dumuzi's "release" and Enkidu's temporary return to the living as narrated in Gilgamesh XII. Like Ishtar's wretched fiancé, Gilgamesh's companion (and lover?) Enkidu is granted a short sabbatical from the miserable city of the dead, effected in his case through the assistance of the sun god, who "opened a chink in the Netherworld and brought the shade of Enkidu up from the Netherworld like a phantom"<sup>10</sup> so that he could instruct Gilgamesh about the rules of the Netherworld.

Dumuzi's short sojourn on earth was not only an opportunity for women to let loose their emotions in lamenting the young god's fate,<sup>11</sup> but also an occasion for the people to perform rituals to remove their ills and send them back to the Netherworld together with Dumuzi.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that such rituals were executed for members of the Assyrian royal family as well.<sup>13</sup>

Did Nabû-zuqup-kenu have this tradition in mind when he wrote his copy of Gilgamesh XII? Did he expect to be able, in a kind of *ad hoc* ritual connected with the Dumuzi festivities, to bring Enkidu up to earth in order to send back down with him the evil associated with the catastrophic death of king Sargon, or maybe even the ghost of the unburied king himself?<sup>14</sup> Or did he rather conjure up Enkidu, perhaps through a recitation of Gilgamesh XII, to ask him, in an act of necromancy, about the whereabouts of Sargon's spirit? These questions cannot be answered with certainty at present. But if it is true that Nabû-zuqup-kenu completed his Gilgamesh copy on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Du'uzu in the wake of news about the death of Sargon and in connection with the mourning rites for Dumuzi, both of which seems probable to me, the whole case would represent an illuminating and very concrete example for the close connection that existed in the ancient Near East between politics, ritual, and myth.

1. See the colophon of the tablet, now edited by A. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, Oxford 2003, 737f (MS N).

2. "Nabû-zuqup-kēnu, das Gilgameš-Epos und der Tod Sargons II.," JCS 51 (1999), 73-90.

3. Unfortunately, we do not know the precise date of Sargon's death, and it is equally uncertain when exactly the news of it reached the Assyrian heartland. The Assyrian Eponym Chronicle B6 tells us in rev. 8-11 that Sennacherib, Sargon's successor, ascended the throne on the 12<sup>th</sup> of Abu (V), but does not specify the month and day of Sargon's defeat (A. R. Millard, SAAS 2, 48, 60, pl. 17). For a discussion of the problem, see JCS 51, 80-82.

4. *ša ina tāhāzi dēku tāmur āta[mar] / abūšu u ummašu rēssu našū u aššassu ina muhhi[š]u ibakk[ā]š[ū] / ša šalamtašu ina šēri nadā[š] / tāmur ātama[r] / eṭemmašu ina eṣeti ul šali[š] / ša eṭemmašu pāqida lā išū tāmur ātamar / šūkulāt diqāri kusipāt akali ša ina sūqī [n]adā ikkal (Gilgamesh XII, 148-153, George, op. cit., 734f).*

5. As clearly stated in the text about the "Sin of Sargon," edited by A. Livingstone, SAA 3, no. 33. It seems probable that Sargon's death is also addressed in Isaiah 14, although later redactors transformed the ill-fated protagonist of this text into a king of Babylon.

6. George, op. cit., 54.

7. Edited by R. Borger, BAL<sup>2</sup>, 95-104; for a new fragment see E. Frahm, ZA 93 (2003), 296.

8. For a description of the festival and the rituals connected with it see M. E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, Bethesda 1993, 479-481; J. A. Scurlock, "K 164 (BA 2, P. 635): New Light on the Mourning Rites for Dumuzi?," RA 86 (1992), 53-67; ead., "Magical Uses of Ancient Mesopotamian Festivals of the Dead," in: M. Meyer, P. Mirecki, *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Leiden 1995, 97-107; M. Fritz, "... und weinten um Tammuz". *Die Götter Dumuzi-Ama' ušumgal'anna und Damu*, AOAT 307, Münster 2003, 343-351.

9. UD 27-KĀM *pa-šá-r[u]* (S. Parpola, SAA 10, no. 19, rev. 1). Cf. "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld," line 410: *ud nin-zu al di-di-e ud-bi hé-búr-[e]* "When your sister (Geštinanna) is demanded (by the netherworld), on that day you (Dumuzi) will be released" (quoted after J. Black et al., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>); Sumerian *búr* corresponds to Akkadian *pašāru*. Note that the Kuyunjik letter states explicitly that the dates for the Dumuzi mourning ritual were the same in Nineveh and in Kalḫu, where Nabû-zuqup-kenu prepared his copy (SAA 10, no. 19, rev. 1-6).

10. *qarrādu ešlu dšamaš mār dnin[gal ...] / takkap eṣeti iptēma / utukku ša dēnkiḫu kī zāqīqi ultu eṣeti ušēlā (Gilgamesh XII, 85-87, George, op. cit., 732f).* Note that Enkidu, like Dumuzi, had to go to the Netherworld for reasons related to the goddess Ishtar: in Gilgamesh VI/VII, Enkidu dies because he killed Ishtar's heavenly bull and insulted the goddess, while in Gilgamesh XII he enters the infernal quarters to fetch playthings for Gilgamesh which are made from the wood of a tree owned by Ishtar.

11. The role of women in the festivities relating to the dead Dumuzi is emphasized in Ezekiel 8: 14.

12. Scurlock, "Magical Uses ..." (see fn. 8).

13. Scurlock, RA 86, 53-67.

14. Perhaps he feared that it was not enough to rely in this matter on Dumuzi, who was divine, but rather weak and inexperienced. Since he was dealing with the ghost of a mighty and powerful king, Nabû-zuqup-kenu might have preferred to have a stronger and more heroic representative from the realm of the dead at his side. Note, however, that Enkidu, unlike Gilgamesh, is otherwise not attested in Mesopotamian texts about the Netherworld, see George, op. cit., 138-144.