CHAPTER FOUR

GULA AND HEALING Spells

Under healing spells I understand those incantations that are either embedded in medical prescriptions or referring to a medical context. The usually short compositions are introduced with the Sumerian logogram $EN_2$ (Akkadian $šiptu$) which is conventionally translated ‘incantation’. However, many of the ‘incantations’ might be better considered as prayers because of contents and style. Because of this observation it is assumed that $šiptu$ / $EN_2$ does not necessarily refer to the nature of the composition but rather to the form of a more or less standardized text that is part of a given ritual.¹ Healing spells are to be recited either during the preparation or the administration of a remedy. Typical expressions to indicate the repetition are $šipta$ $tamannu$ $(3 / 7 / 7 \ u 7.\text{KAM}_2)$ “you recite the incantation (three, seven, seven and seven times)” or $šipta$ $annā$ $tamannu$ “you recite the this incantation.” Possibly depending on local traditions or scribal preferences either the $incipit$ of the spell is quoted, i.e. citing the first words of text, or the incantation is written in extenso; in the latter case the incantation is detached from the prescription by a dividing line. Not all prescriptions contain incantations and often several incantations refer to one and the same medical prescription.

We have no information as to whether incantations had to be recited with a particular intonation; the verb used to designate the recital is $manû$ (written logographically $ŠID$) with the meaning ‘to count, to recount events, to recite’, though manifold repetition and the use of gibberish words or mumbo-jumbo suggest a rhythmical singsong.² Few incantations had to be whispered or murmured. The context in which the respective Akkadian verb $luḫḫušu$ or the noun $liḫšu$ ‘whisper’ is attested is quite circumscribed: if a patient were to suffer from an attack of the Spirit-of-the-dead, the $Eṭemmu$ ghost, who entered his victim through the ear according to

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² The effect and function of mumbo-jumbo spells is discussed in Chapter 6.2.
Ancient Babylonian thought, the incantation was to be whispered in his right or left ear. Occasionally, incantations just had to be spoken aloud using the verb ‘to speak, to utter, to declare’, Akkadian qabû, usually written logographically DU₁₀.GA.

Broadly speaking we may distinguish between universal healing incantations that could be recited in different medical contexts and those used for one or more rather defined settings. In the present chapter I have brought together, to the best of my knowledge, the healing spells that invoke the goddess or mention her. My aim is to study the medical context and explore from another point of view the relationship between the healing goddess and diseases. In Chapter 4.5 I discuss the function and implication of healing spells; in applying the theory of discourse metaphor I analyse the imagery of some healing spells to show how Ancient Babylonians conceptualized pain and illness. Special emphasis is laid on the metaphors that are linked to the healing goddess.

4.1 Healing Spells Appealing to Gula

About 350 healing spells are included in the corpus of medical prescriptions; only few of them address the healing goddess. In this section I offer eight spells in transliteration and translation. The texts provide a good insight into the typical characteristics of the corpus regarding style and language. There are few more incantations directed to Gula but since they are found in an unspecified medical context or have a religious setting I have not taken them into consideration.

3 See e.g. BAM V 503 ii: 33’ ina GEŠTUG ZAG-šu₂ li-ih-šu₂ ‘a whisper in his right ear’; or BAM V 503 ii: 36: ina GEŠTUG GUB₃-šu₂ li-ih-šu₂ ‘a whisper in his left ear’. See for the conception of the etemmu entering his victims’ bodies through the ear the discussion of J.A. Scurlock, Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia (= AMD 3), Leiden – Boston 2006, p. 14.

4 See e.g. BAM IV 322 rev. 54: ki-a-am DU₁₀.GA ‘thus you shall say’.


6 See also my discussion in Chapter 6.2.

7 This preliminary number goes back to my compilation of incantations attested in medical prescriptions.

8 See for an incantation without specific medical context the composition ‘Ninsina, mother of the land!’ (EN₂ *nin.i₃.si.in.na ama kalam.ma.ke₄) for which see B. Böck, Das keilschriftliche Handbuch “Einreibung” Muššuʾu (V/a), p. 86; see for the edition pp. 184–189, 208 ll. 1–16. Two further incantations are attested in instructions on how to please gods so that they intercede for the supplicant for his wellbeing. One spell is incompletely