CHAPTER SIX

THE CULTURAL SETTING OF ANCIENT BABYLONIAN MEDICINE

6.1. The Healing Goddess in the Medical Literature: A Recapitulation

Ancient Mesopotamian culture had its proper system of beliefs to explain what caused illness, how it could be cured and who should be involved in the process of treatment. In the present study I have presented one of the underlying cultural beliefs, namely the one which was related to the healing goddess. Gula (or Ninisina) was associated with a number of afflictions; also parts of the human body were attributed to her. She was believed to be responsible for skin sores (sim₃, simmu) which she treated with one of her surgical instruments.¹ The scalpel was so characteristic that it turned—together with her animal, the dog—into one of the distinctive attributes with which the goddess could be easily distinguished in iconography.² I have reflected on the connotation of Sumerian sa as general term for the ‘cord-like system’ of the body and on lexical affinities between terms for skin diseases and afflictions of the musculoskeletal system.³ It is possible, but difficult to confirm, that these affinities are the raison d’être for the association of diseases of the musculoskeletal system with the healing goddess. The religious conceptualization of the goddess as midwife gave rise to the correspondence between her and the belly as place of the unborn baby.⁴ I have suggested that especially afflictions of the gastrointestinal tract, namely those caused by the dysfunction of the biliary system, were associated with the goddess.⁵

Beliefs are the foundation for healing practices. My initial question was whether the medical literature proper would echo the conception of the healing goddess as she is described in religious texts. For carrying out this research I have divided the body of medical writing into three parts: diagnostic and prognostic texts which were compiled into the handbook

¹ See Chapter 2.2.2.
² See Chapter 2.2.1.
³ See Chapter 2.2.3.
⁴ See Chapter 2.2.4.
⁵ See Chapter 4.5.
Sakikkû, incantations embedded in medical prescriptions or referring to a medical context, and medical prescriptions recommending healing plants that allude to the healing goddess. These three parts correspond to the two principal category groups of first millennium cuneiform medical literature: following the distinction of A.L. Oppenheim, the handbook Sakikkû would belong to the ‘scientific’ school since it formed part of the lore the āšipu, as the scholar, exorcist and conjurer, had to master. Indeed, the handbook is the result of a large-scale development rooted in observed facts as well as abstraction to associate symptoms with supernatural agents under whose authority the diseases were believed to fall or to give an estimate of the chances of survival. The other group is formed by texts that relate to the actual practice of medicine that consisted in both the administration of medicaments and the recitation of incantations. In this regard, the study has set out to examine in which way the belief in or the idea of Gula was manifest in medical ‘theory’ and healing practices.

The esoteric plant name referring to the healing goddess, ‘Ninigizibara’s dog’, a byname of the buʾšānu plant, was the starting point for this study and provided the basis for connecting Gula with a healing plant. As I have discussed in Chapter Five, two plants were associated with the tutelary deity of medicine: buʾšānu, aka ‘dog’s tongue’, lišān kalbi, and ṣaṣuntu.9 The name buʾšānu itself is homonymous with the buʾšānu disease; the term is derived from the root baʾāšu, ‘to smell badly, to stink’. The motivation for the name is not only based on the physical perception of smell but can also be sought in the phenomenon of homonymy with a disease: the plant is named after the buʾšānu disease because it was considered the principal medicinal plant to treat the disease. The term lišān kalbi is an alternative name for buʾšānu; in fact, it was understood as its secret or coded name in the uru.an.na encyclopaedia on medicinal plants.10 I have discussed that the motivation for the name lišān kalbi is in all likelihood twofold: it might refer to a characteristic formation or consistence of the leaves and it could also refer to the smell.11 Taking into account the byname ‘Gula’s dog’ of the buʾšānu plant, the name lišān kalbi ‘dog’s tongue’ acquires a religious character because it alludes to the animal of

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7 See Chapter 3, introductory part.
8 See for the use of the term ‘theory’ below, Chapter 6.2, pp. 194–195.
9 See Chapters 5.1 and 5.2.
10 See Chapter 5.1.2.
11 See Chapter 5.1.3.