EPILEPSY IN MESOPOTAMIA RECONSIDERED

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Identifying diseases in ancient Mesopotamia has always encountered philological difficulties.1 Such difficulties are complicated further by the fact that the modern classification of some diseases is still variable, and this includes controversy about whether certain symptoms (e.g., involuntary muscle movements) should be classified as epilepsy. It is in this light that Marten Stol’s *Epilepsy in Babylonia* provides a fresh opportunity to review some of the problems involved in the study of Babylonian and Near Eastern medicine in general.2

We should first note that the condition identified by Marten Stol as “epilepsy” previously had received little attention from Assyriologists. As Stol notes, Erich Ebeling provided a very brief discussion in the *Reallexicon der Assyriologie* (1938) that did not go much beyond what had been written by Karl Sudhoff, a non-Assyriologist, in 1911.3 To be fair, neither of those scholars had much information available to them.

In *Epilepsy in Babylonia*, Stol profiles some of the basic historical sources (e.g., Hippocrates’ *On the Sacred Disease*) for the study of epilepsy, and announces that his principal aim is to “survey how the Babylonians viewed and treated epilepsy.”4 Stol’s examination of Babylonian terminology concludes that the Akkadian *benmu* is the general word for epilepsy, and he argues that the Sumerian *an.ta.šub.ba* is the more technical name given to “the sudden attack” of epilepsy.

Another important term is *miqtu*, which he admits does not always mean epilepsy, but which is remarkably paralleled by the later European notion of epilepsy as “the falling sickness.” There are also

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1 For some examples, see P. B. Adamson, “Some Anatomical and Pathological Terms in Akkadian,” *RA* 84 (1990) 27–32.
3 *Epilepsy*, 3.
4 *Epilepsy*, Preface.
demonic entities associated with epilepsy, and these include the enigmatic “spawn of šulpæa,” Lugal-urra (“Lord of the roof”), Lugal-nam-en-na, and Lugal-amašpæa. He also discusses epilepsy in relation to related afflictions (e.g., “melancholy,” “Hand of the God”) and demons such as Alû, Incubus, and Succubus.

Stol provides an edition and translation of the extant portions of the Diagnostic Handbook (SA.GIG) (Tablets XXVI, XXVII–XXVIII, XXIX, and XXX) focusing on epilepsy. This work supersedes the old edition of René Labat’s TDP in some of those sections, and includes tablets (e.g., XXVI) not known to Labat. In addition, Stol provides a new edition of a second diagnostic text, known after its incipit (“If you approach a sick man”). This edition is based on a text (STT 1 89) published by O. R. Gurney. Stol regards it as an older version of the Diagnostic Handbook, and he suggests that the editor of the Diagnostic Handbook composed his version in reaction to it.

Stol’s discussion of therapeutics centres on the use of, inter alia, stag’s horn, blood, fumigation, amulets, and “jasper,” a stone often associated with the moon. Indeed, here and in the following three chapters, he outlines the links among epilepsy, calendrics, and the moon, links which have continued into modern times in many cultures.

In his treatment of the sociology of epilepsy, Stol discusses the societal reactions to children struck with epilepsy, as well as some of the legal aspects of epilepsy. He includes discussion of epilepsy in the Code of Hammurabi, Neo-Assyrian contracts, and Greek law. Finally, he delves into the occurrence of epilepsy in animals.

In order to assess the problems involved in identifying “epilepsy” in ancient Mesopotamia one must consider briefly what is in modern medicine meant by “epilepsy,” the definition of which can be quite complex and varied. According to one authority: “Epilepsy can be defined as the repeated occurrence of seizures in the absence of an acute precipitating systemic or brain insult.”

5 Ernst Niedermeyer’s authoritative manual includes an entire chapter on “Differential Diagnosis: Epileptic vs. Non-Epileptic Attacks,” and he would classify