There are two words for “to be ill” in Akkadian: marāšu and salā’u. The substantives derived from these verbs, globally meaning “disease”, are muršu and sili’tu (and occasionally masla’tu). The first pair, marāšu and muršu, is widely attested, and the verb has cognates in other Semitic languages, where it also means “to be ill” (for example in epigraphic South Arabic). In this contribution, I will concentrate on the second pair.

The verb salā’u has been translated in various ways, but nobody has discussed it.¹ W. von Soden’s German dictionary (AHw) translates “(be)-sprengen, infizieren, überschütten” and remarks that the word may be a “differentiation” of salā˘hu I, “(Wasser) sprengen”. Not written in von Soden’s telegraphic style and offering full translations of the meaningful passages, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) gives more room for interpretation and reflection. Like the others, the new dictionary CDA distinguishes salā˘hu “to sprinkle” from salā’u, which it translates “to sprinkle, slander”.

We suggest that salā’u and salā˘hu should not be distinguished, i.e. that there is only one verb, salā’u, which has the basic meaning “to sprinkle” and several more specialised meanings derived from the notion of sprinkling. The reason why the phantom verb salā˘hu was thought to exist is that in the Old Babylonian period the cuneiform script did not yet have signs indicating the combinations vowel+alef or ‘alef+vowel, such as arise in forms of salā’u. Instead, the ‘alef was expressed either by using the letter ū, or by creating a hiatus.² Thus in Old Babylonian


² Another example of a verb with ‘alef as the final radical is masā’u “to rob, plunder”; this is also spelled with ū in Old Babylonian.
the forms of the verb salā'u are written as if they were forms of a verb salāḥu, and the same applies to derived forms: the substantive sili’tu is written silihttu. In later periods, forms and derivatives of salā'u can be written with signs in the ‘aleph range, but owing to orthographic conservatism they are sometimes still written with signs in the ḫ range, and indeed one finds variants with ‘aleph and ḫ in manuscripts of the same composition (e.g. Ištar’s Descent 118 is-luḥ-ści-ма var. is-lu-’ści-ма)

salā'u in Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian

In the Old Babylonian period the verb salā'u (written as if it were salāḥu) is attested with the literal meaning “to sprinkle” in the following contexts:

- “To sprinkle” is used for a kind of irrigation, as Mari scholars pointed out; “faire l’arrosage”.3
- It is said of barley: “In the whole house the barley is “sprinkled” (= damp?) ([ṣ]e-um su-lu-ух), there is nothing” (OBTIV 15: 11–13). Barley as fodder and rations, is characterised “from the barley for sprinkling” (ša ṣe-im ša så-là-i-im) (OBTIV 149: 8; month XI; Kiskissum).

The verb salā'u also has a metaphoric meaning based on “to sprinkle”, i.e. to sprinkle with evil. In Old Assyrian letters this means: “with evil words”: “(mit Vorwürfen) überschütten” (AHw).4 Other English translations, such as “to bespatter”, “to criticize”, look like acceptable translations, but “to slander” (CDA) is too strong.

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