SOME NOTES ON MEDICAL INFORMATION OUTSIDE THE MEDICAL CORPORA

MARTIN WORTHINGTON*

To date, discussions of healing in Mesopotamia tend to focus on ancient “professional” medical literature, i.e. on the corpora of medical (therapeutic and diagnostic) tablets. The reasons for this are clear and proper, but at the same time it is important to note that there are significant qualitative limitations to the information which the currently known medical corpora can yield.

Before these limitations are introduced, it is important to recognise that discussants of Mesopotamian healing have repeatedly drawn on non-medical sources, primarily letters. Already in 1965, E. Ritter included a selection of Middle Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian letters of medical interest in her famous article in the Festschrift for Benno Landsberger.1 More recently, illnesses and doctors in Mari were studied by J.-M. Durand on the evidence of letters;2 L. Sassmannshausen gathered references to doctors in Middle Babylonian administrative

---

* The bulk of the research for this article was undertaken during a re-invitation scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) held in Leipzig and Heidelberg from March to May 2006. I am deeply beholden to the DAAD for the opportunity to conduct the research and enjoy interesting and instructive conversations with Dr Nils Heeßel and Prof. Annette Zgoll, who also commented most usefully on drafts of this paper. It is a pleasure further to thank Professors Tzvi Abusch, Andrew George and Marten Stol for their careful scrutiny and very valuable suggestions.


documents;\textsuperscript{3} W. Farber used Mari letters to investigate beliefs relating to contagion;\textsuperscript{4} K. Volk collected letters which mention diseases of children;\textsuperscript{5} N.P. Heeßel discussed references to medical diagnosis in non-medical sources;\textsuperscript{6} M. Stol made a letter-based study of nutrition and bodily care in Old Babylonian times;\textsuperscript{7} P. Villard examined the evidence of letters for healers and healing at the Neo-Assyrian court;\textsuperscript{8} M.J. Geller discussed a number of letters in connection with the rationale behind the choice of curative substances.\textsuperscript{9} E. Robson presented three investigations of medical matters, drawing on Sumerian literature and Neo-Assyrian scholarly letters.\textsuperscript{10} Incidental references to non-medical sources bearing on medical matters are further scattered through many discussions of various aspects of Mesopotamian medicine.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{3} L. Sassmannshausen, \textit{Beiträge zur Verwaltung und Gesellschaft Babyloniens in der Kassttenzeit}, Baghdader Forschungen 21 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2001), 72–73. Note especially the reference to a gal a-se-e “chief of the asûs”, which “vielleicht auf eine hierarchische Gliederung der Ärzteschaft hin[deutet]” (p. 73 with fn. 1177).


