

# THE BIRTHDAY OF ASAKKU

## ARKADIUSZ SOLTYSIAK

### Abstract

In a letter to Aššur, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon informed his god about a campaign against the small state of Šubria located in the hills north of Assyria. When Assyrian troops besieged Uppume, the capital city of Šubria, in the dead of night “on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of Kislimu, the birthday of Asakku”, the defenders tried to burn the rampart constructed by the Assyrians; this was the only military success of the Šubrians who not long after were defeated by their enemies. The most interesting element of this story is the date of this event, which according to the letter’s author was not accidental and explicitly called *uhulgalû* (Akkad. “unfavourable day”). The term “birthday of Asakku” is not known from other sources, but its significance may be explained in terms of Assyrian hemerology, astromancy and astral symbolism. First, it was the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month, the day of lunar third quarter and one of five most dangerous days in the month when appropriate rituals must have been performed in order to prevent the increased activity of demons. Second, the month of Kislimu was close to the winter solstice and attributed to Nergal, the god of the Underworld and great warrior. The link between this date and Asakku, a stony monster in Sumerian lore and a demon of the eastern mountains in Assyrian tradition, was well-grounded in contemporary speculative theology in which the combat of a warrior-god against Asakku had been connected with winter storms. The whole passage discussed seems to be a deliberate attempt to set the campaign against Šubria in a broader cosmological context which contemporary learned Assyrians would find easy to recognise, using the network of astronomical and calendrical symbols developed during the Neo-Assyrian period by priest-astromancers.

Keywords: Assyria, history of constellations, winter solstice, Mars, astromancy.

The corpus of Neo-Assyrian historical texts contains, among other things, a letter from the king Esarhaddon to the god Ašur, informing him about the military campaign in the hills north of Assyria. In 673 BCE Esarhaddon sieged Uppume, the capital city of a small Hurrian state called Šubria (Dezső 2006). Assyrian troops constructed a rampart but “on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of Kislimu, unfavourable day (*uhulgalû*), on the birthday of Asakku, when the night is deepest”, the defenders tried to take the initiative and burn the rampart. Fortunately for the Assyrians, a northerly wind extinguished the fire or turned it against the city walls. In the end, Esarhaddon conquered Uppume and destroyed the city (Borger 1956, p.104).

At first sight, the text contains no reference to the celestial bodies and gives only basic calendrical information, as would be expected in a military report of this kind. In reality, however, this letter is a very clear case of the use of astromancy in Assyrian policy, maybe not as direct as in the hundred pieces of correspondence between Esarhaddon and his priest-astromancers, but also very important. The astronomical background can be clarified after more detailed discussion of four elements underlined in the royal report: (1) the month Kislimu, the 9<sup>th</sup> month in the standard Mesopotamian calendar; (2) the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month; (3) Asakku, which was thought to oppose Esarhaddon; and (4) the northerly wind that helped the Assyrians.

### The first element: Kislimu

Kislimu is the common name of the 9<sup>th</sup> month in the standard Mesopotamian calendar, used in Akkadian texts from the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. It usually occurred at the beginning of winter (December/January), although in the lunar calendar this depended upon the regularity of intercalations. In an Old Babylonian document (BM 17175+17284) the date of winter solstice is fixed as the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Kislimu (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p.163), and this association is also attested in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, although in some Neo-Assyrian documents Kislimu is replaced as the date of winter solstice by the 10<sup>th</sup> month Tebetu (Horowitz 1996, p.42).

Standard Neo-Assyrian menologies (such as AO 6775, K 7164 and ND 4389) connected the month Kislimu with the god Nergal, “the great warrior” (Wiseman 1969, p.176–182); this association is also attested in earlier sources. In Old Babylonian Larsa the ritual bath of Nergal was organised during the 9<sup>th</sup> month (Cohen 1993, p.234) and in contemporary Mari the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month were the feast of Nergal’s chariot (Cohen 1993, p.292). In a Neo-Assyrian letter from the priest Nabû-šum-iškun to the king, the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Kislimu is called the day of prayer to Nergal (ARAK 371; Weidner 1932, p.116; Hunger 1992, p.211).

The menology of the Middle Assyrian catalogue of months and constellations called “Astrolab B” de-

scribes Kislimu as the month of Nergal, the mighty hero who had ascended from the Netherworld (Weidner 1915, p.88). More informative is the tablet KAV 218 found in Aššur which gives precise dates for the descent (18<sup>th</sup> day of Du'uzu) and ascension (28<sup>th</sup> day of Kislimu) of Nergal (Gurney 1962, p.158). It is very likely that these dates were related to the period of invisibility of Mars, the planet strongly associated with Nergal in Neo-Assyrian astronomical sources. Perhaps we are seeing here the same kind of lore as is found in the famous story about the descent of Ištar, which reflected the inferior conjunction of the planet Venus (Sołtysiak 2003).

Another god associated with the month Kislimu was Ninurta, the main character of the festival that commemorated the victory of this god over the bird Anzû. An important event during the festival was a race along the city walls mentioned in ritual tablet KAR 143+219, which moreover associates Ninurta with Nergal (Jacobsen 1975, p.72–73; Frymer-Kensky 1983, p.136; Cohen 1993, p.292). It is likely that the fight between Ninurta and Anzû is represented in a famous sculpture found in Ninurta's temple in Nimrud built by Ašurnasirpal II (Gadd 1936, p.138). Another version of the same tradition, preserved in some tablets from Ashurbanipal's library (K 6359, 6330+9338), informs us that Ninurta defeated Anzû, Kingu (Marduk's antagonist in Babylonian texts) and *asakku*-demon (Cohen 1993, p.333–334). The association of Anzu with the month Kislimu was still alive in the Seleucid period and a medical text (TCL 6, 12) from Uruk explains that an unguent for the 9<sup>th</sup> month should be prepared with the head, feathers and blood of Anzu (Reiner 1995, p.116–117).

A link between Nergal and the planet Mars is noted in the so-called "Astrolabs", tablets containing lists of months each of which was connected with constellations or stars from three sectors of the sky. The star from the "path of Ea" (southern sky) for the month Kislimu was Salbatanu, which is the planet Mars (Waerden 1949, p.9; Horowitz 1998, p.162). During the same month the star of the "path of Anu" (the area of the celestial equator) was a "Demon with gaping mouth" (sumer. UD.KA.DUH.A) called Panther (*nimru*) in Akkadian. According to the series *mulApin* I iv 27, the heliacal rising of this constellation, identified as *Cygnus+Lacerta+Cassiopeia*, took place on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month Kislimu (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p.59). In astronomical tablet BM 82923, 25–26 the planet Mars (Salbatanu) is directly associated with death (i.e. Nergal) and the "Demon with gaping mouth" (Walker and Hunger 1977, p.30–31).

In menologies the month Kislimu was connected with rain, storms and high water or flood. The standard me-

nological series *Iqqur ipuš* gives, among other things, the following exemplary apodoses for Kislimu (Labat 1965): "Adad (the god of storm) will make heavy rain and shrink the land" (§ 69); "there will be rain" (§70); "there will be rain caused by Adad" (§74); "there will come flood" (§92); "thunders of Adad" (§104); and "Adad and Nergal will devour the land" (§103). The association between Kislimu and precipitation was obvious for people living in Mesopotamia, where most rains falls during the winter (Oates and Oates 1976, p.111).

#### The second element: the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month

In Mesopotamian hemerologies contemporary with Esarhaddon's letter, the most dangerous days were those related to the following lunar phases: the 7<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> day of each month (Reiner 1995, p.113; Rochberg-Halton 1988, p.38). The 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month was recognised as the day of the third quarter, as in the tablet K 2164 obv. II 2–10 (Livingstone 1986, p.39), and some late texts from Uruk mention the *hitpu*-sacrifices on days 6/7, 13/14, 20/21, and 27/28 of the month, obviously related to phases of the Moon (Beaulieu 1993, p.80; Robbins 1996, p.79).

More particulars concerning the symbolism of the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month are provided by the ritual tablets. In a late supplication litany the 21<sup>st</sup> day is called the day of "realisation of Sin's and Šamaš's accounts" (Wiseman 1969, p.181), meaning that on this day the gods of the Moon and of the Sun executed the fate of the land, this having been fixed by the great gods during the new moon days (it is interesting that in the same hemerology the 27<sup>th</sup> day was called "dance of Nergal", which perhaps reflects the tablet KAV 218). According to KAR 69, 21 exorcisms should be performed on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month (Bottéro 1985, p.111) and according to a magical tablet (STT 89, 31) spells are most effective on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> day (Reiner 1995, p.106).

#### The third element: Asakku

During the Neo-Assyrian period Asakku was conceived both as a mythological monster and as a class of demons (both these meanings being suggested in Esarhaddon's letter). The first definition of Asakku is much older and is rooted in the Sumerian tradition from Girsu, where the stony monster Asag (this being the Sumerian prototype of the Akkadian name Asakku) inhabited mountains in the east. Asag is presented as an enemy of the god Ningirsu, called Ninurta in other Sumerian traditions. Their battle is vividly depicted

in the long and famous hymn *Lugal-e*, and the whole story is most likely a reflection of the winter storms and spring floods connected with the annual re-generation of plant vegetation (Jacobsen 1987, p.236–248). As a powerful monster living in the Zagros mountains, Asag/Asakku was sometimes identified with the giant bird Anzu, a much more important character in Sumerian and Akkadian mythology, and also presented as Ningirsu's antagonist (Cohen 1993, p.8; Wiggermann 1992, p.161). In the Neo-Assyrian period Ninurta was sometimes identified with Nergal for his symbolism as a warrior, an association already indicated in the discussion of the month Kislimu.

After the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE Asakku started to be presented as a conventional enemy of the great gods. He is mentioned as such a character in the lists of monsters defeated by Marduk (Livingstone 1986, p.153–154) and in the mysterious list AO 17626 of “seven defeated gods whose eyes were placed on a bronze kettle”, where Asakku was associated with Antu, the wife of Anu, the god of the heavens (Livingstone 1986, p.199).

At that time Asakku was also presented as a demon living outside a town, according to the enigmatic text called “The Nippur Compendium” (George 1992, p.157), and some medical texts mentioned *asakku*-disease (Wiggermann 1992, p.162), also known from the short list of omens in the series *mulApin* (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p.118). A very mysterious passage in an astronomical commentary BM 55466 to *Enuma eliš* provides information about the visibility of the stars of *asakku*-demons on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month Tebetu. A direct link between the monster Asakku and *asakku*-demons is provided by the medical tablet BM 34035 in which one of the exorcisms mentioned reflects the race of Ninurta trying to chase Asakku; the god is symbolised by white gypsum, while the monster/demon is symbolised by black bitumen (Livingstone 1986, p.173).

#### The fourth element: the northerly wind

There are many Assyrian and Babylonian lists of world directions, winds, and their associations. They differ in detail, but some symbolic elements are quite consistent. In the context of Esarhaddon's letter, the most interesting of these is the frequent association between Jupiter and the north and between Mars and the east (Rochberg-Halton 1988, p.57): Jupiter was usually treated as the planet of the king and the association between Mars and Nergal, the warrior and the god of death, was also strong.

In a late round diagram W 26030/121 found in Uruk we find a list of the four winds linked to the four parts of the year: the month Kislimu is mentioned as the turning point between the northerly and easterly wind (Horowitz 1998, p.194). An earlier Neo-Assyrian explanatory text *šumma Šîn ina tamartišu* 4 associates Kislimu with the northerly wind and the path of Enlil, the area of the sky north of the celestial equator (Koch-Westenholz 1995, p.108). The northerly wind was usually called <sup>im</sup>si.sá (Sumer. “the proper wind”) and the easterly wind <sup>im</sup>kur.ra (Sumer. “the wind from the mountains”), which reflects the simple observation that the northerly wind was most common in Mesopotamia and there are mountains east of this region (Horowitz 1998, p.197). Almost every known source associates the northerly wind with the constellation <sup>mul</sup>mar.gíd.da (*Ursa Minor*), which was also quite obvious (Horowitz 1998, p.199; Koch-Westenholz 1995, p.155). The easterly wind was connected in <sup>mul</sup>Apin II i 71 with two constellations: <sup>mul</sup>Šu.gi (Sumer. “Old Man”, *Perseus*), and <sup>mul</sup>.mul (*Pleiades*).

#### Conclusion

If Esarhaddon stated that he had troubles during the siege of Uppume on 21<sup>st</sup> day of Kislimu, it would be nothing but a basic account of military activities. However, the whole passage relating the events on the “birthday of Asakku” seems to be a deliberate attempt to set the campaign against Šubria in a broader cosmological context, easy to recognise for contemporary learned Assyrians. It uses a network of astronomical and calendrical symbols developed during the Neo-Assyrian period by priest-astromancers and used frequently in royal propaganda. The actual date of an event that was not important from a military point of view has been used as a trigger for an association which presented Esarhaddon's victory as a reflection of the victory of Nergal/Ninurta over the monster Asakku, Asakku symbolising the mountains and thus also the mountainous state of Šubria.

The powers of evil attacked during an unfavourable day in the month of winter storms connected with the god of war and of death. However, the king of Assyria supported by a favourable northerly wind sent by Aššur (not mentioned, but indicated by the association of the northerly wind with Jupiter, the royal planet) defeated the Šubrians who were supported by evil demons connected with the mountains. This act made him a follower of warrior gods who killed the dangerous monsters and enabled the regeneration of the land after the winter.

In this whole story there is only one point that cannot be directly explained using the known sources: the meaning of the term “birthday of Asakku”. There are no analogies for this name, but it is very likely that it was used to underline the whole significance of Esarhaddon’s relationship and to associate Asakku with the constellation called “Demon with gaping mouth”, which heliacally rose around the date of the Uppume siege and obviously fitted well into the whole network of associations suggested by the passage we have discussed.

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### Abbreviations

AO – Antiquités Orientales au Musée du Louvre, Paris.

ARAK – H.C. Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*.

BM – British Museum, London.

K – Kouyunjik (inventory number).

KAR – Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts, ed. E. Ebeling.

KAV – Keilschrifttexte aus Assur verschiedenen Inhalts, ed. O. Schroeder.

ND – Nimrud (inventory number).

TCL – Textes cunéiformes, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

STT – The Sultantepe Tablets.

W – Uruk/Warka (inventory number).

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## ASAKKU GIMTADIENIS

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#### Santrauka

Dievui Ašurui skirtame laiške Asirijos karalius Asarhadonas (Esarhaddon) informuoja savo dievą apie žygį prieš nedidelę Šubrijos (Šubria) valstybę, buvusią kalnuose, šiauriau Asirijos. Kai Asirijos kariuomenė apgulė Šubrijos valstybės sostinę Upumę (Uppume), nakties gūdumoje „21 Kislimo ir Asakku gimtadienio diena“ gynėjai bandė sudeginti asirų pylimo konstrukciją; tai buvo vienintelė Šubrijos gyventojų sėkmė, kadangi neilgai trukus jie buvo nugalėti savo priešų. Labiausiai dominantis motyvas šiame pasakojime yra paties įvykio data, kuri, pasak laiško autoriaus, nebuvo atsitiktinė. Ji aiškiai įvardijama kaip uhulgalū (akadų kalba tai reiškia „nepalanki diena“). Posakis „Asakku gimtadienis“ kituose šaltiniuose neminimas, bet jo svarba tikriausiai gali būti paaiškinta Asirijos hemerologijos, astromantijos ir astralinio simbolizmo kontekste. Pirma, tai buvo 21-oji mėnesio diena, trečio Mėnulio ketvirčio diena ir viena iš penkių pačių pavojingiausių mėnesio dienų, kai atitinkami ritualai galėjo būti atliekami tam, kad užkirstų kelią padidėjusiam demonų aktyvumui. Antra, žiemos solsticijai artimas Kislimu mėnuo buvo priskiriamas Nergalui (Nergal), požemių karalystės dievui ir didžiajam kariui. Ryšys tarp šios datos ir Asakku – akmeninės pabaisos tradiciniame šumerų tikėjime bei rytinių kalnų demono asirų tradicijoje – buvo gerai pagrįstas šiuolaikinėje spekuliatyvioje teologijoje, kurioje dievo-kario kova prieš Asakku yra siejama su žiemos audromis. Visa svarsityta įvykių eiga, atrodo, buvo sąmoningas bandymas pagrįsti žygį prieš Šubriją platesniame kosmologiniame kontekste, kuris tuometinių išsilavinusių asirų būtų lengvai atpažįstamas, remiantis visuma astronominių ir kalendorinių simbolių, paplitusių Naujojo – Asirijos – laikotarpio metu tarp dvasininkų-astronomų.

Vertė Algirdas Girininkas, Jonas Vaiškūnas