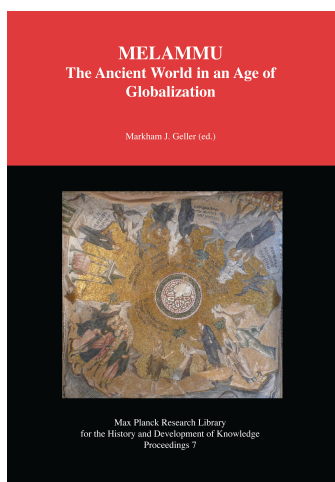


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Nineb Lamassu:

Gilgamesh's Plant of Rejuvenation and Qāṭīne's Sīsīsāmbur



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Chapter 6

Gilgameš's Plant of Rejuvenation and Qāṭīne's Sīsīsāmbur

Nineb Lamassu

Although the latest Gilgameš tablet dates to the first or second century BCE, and the latest cuneiform reference to Gilgameš is from the second century (Tigay 2002, 251), this timeless epic naturally aroused and continues to arouse excitement.

Right from its very discovery and decipherment, connections were seen between it and the Biblical story of Noah. Soon after that parallels were observed between Gilgameš and classical Greek literature. It is now also clear that the name "Gilgameš" survived beyond the cuneiform culture and passed into Mandaic literature, the Book of the Giants and in the Syriac writings of Theodor Bar Konai (ibid. 252). Recently, scholars have perceived traces of Gilgameš in such literary works as the story of Combabos (Parpola 1997, XCVI), and the story of Buluqiya (Dalley 1991, 1–17; 1998a, 47). George on the other hand, despite reaching the conclusion, "[...] the epic we know died with the cuneiform writing system, along with the large proportion of the traditional scribal literature that was of no practical, scientific or religious use in a world without cuneiform," (George 2003, 70), continues to state that traditions pertaining to Gilgameš may have been handed down on Aramaic papyri and as oral tales, which survived in a transformed form in later Greek, medieval Jewish and Arabic literature. However, he argues:

In any reconstruction of how the ancient corpus of Babylonian literature could inform the literary creativity of the other civilizations it is necessary (a) to allow for existence of common narrative patterns and motifs and (b) to postulate intermediate landing stages in Aramaic, Phoenician, Hellenistic Greek. (George 2003, 70)

It is suggested that the postulated intermediate landing stage in Aramaic should be sought in the orally transmitted folk traditions of the modern Assyrians, an area which has not received sufficient attention, and has not been subjected to thorough scholarly and scientific research (Donabed 2007, 352). Scholars would have a better chance in finding this landing stage in this oral tradition than in the

mostly lost Mesopotamian Aramaic literature, where we would expect to find it along with *Šamaš-šum-ukīn*'s revolt, and the stories of *Aḥīqar* and Tobit.

Until recently, the modern Assyrians maintained a rich and vivacious oral literature, especially the mountain Assyrians of Hakkari, who "[...] have known how to keep their own folklore intact from Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish or Persian influences" (Pennachietti 1985–1986, 40). Their semi-independent governing system was a primary factor in maintaining an undiluted culture (Aboona 1999, 250; 2008, 9). However, the tragic modern history of these people has caused their forced migration and resettlement in such environments where this rich oral culture has no opportunity to organically prosper and be preserved. Consequently the modern Assyrian oral tradition is slowly being lost to oblivion, which means, as scholars, "[...] we are obligated to devote all our resources to collecting information on the existing spoken dialects before they disappear" (Hoberman 1990, 79; Pennachietti 1985–1986, 40), thus leaving aside any comparative literary research. Another difficulty presented by these peoples' tragic modern history is the fact that this originally rich tradition has not been documented in genuine surroundings but in marginal areas and distant localities (Pennachietti 1985–1986, 40) thus divorcing it from the very environment that influenced its development. The consequences of this are made manifest in the now lost nuances of many terms and expressions, and the abolition of cultural environment that helped maintain it.¹

The most significant part of this oral folklore and what is of concern here is "Zmīrtā D'Qāṭīne," an oral epic in a prosimetrum style told by a village minstrels and semi-professional troubadours. Thus it is a composition where short prose intervals are used to bind the verses together. This literary oral epic was first reduced to writing by Rabi William Daniel, an excellent poet and musician, whose contribution to modern Assyrian poetry, folk and classical music remains unparalleled. However, his version which encompasses 6,000 verses published in three volumes as "Qāṭīne Gabbara" between 1946–1983,² does not conform to the epic as it is orally maintained. Although the sources of Daniel's version are the oral versions of Qāṭīne as maintained by the Hakkari, Plain of Nineveh, and Urmi Assyrians, it is evident that he has employed artistic license to create his version, turning it into a hybrid wrapped in modern concepts of ideology and national awakening and emancipation (Donabed 2007, 343). Therefore it is necessary to distinguish it from "the Assyrian cultural consciousness or collective folk memory that pervades the song of the unsung bard, the singer of traditional

¹This writer struggled to find the meaning of 'Šawarta,' until he traveled to Iraq and recorded an elderly villager in the Assyrian village of Deregni, and learned that it is used to refer to a passage located on the peak of a mountain.

²See (Odisho 1985–1985; Dinkha 1991; Daniel 1961, 1974, 1983).

stories who rarely becomes famous" (ibid. 350); not only because Qāṭīne of the collective folk memory is a product of an organically evolved cultural literature, but because it has more in common with our Epic of Gilgameš.

6.1 The Genre of Qāṭīne

The Assyrians do not seem to have differentiated between Qāṭīne and any other normal song. This heroic tale is always referred to as "Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne," that is, The Song of Qāṭīne. However, it is clearly not a normal song and does not quietly fit within the known Assyrian folk songs and such genres as *Rawe*, *Diwani*, *Šeddule*, *Lilyana* and *Zmīryāta D'Kuša*.³

The village minstrel or the troubadour would take four to seven consecutive nights—depending on the individual—to complete the epic. Unlike other short heroic songs, the minstrel would stop singing the verses, at certain dramatic points, only to continue with the story through prose narrations. These prose intervals are used to create special moments of suspense. Contrary to other heroic songs, Zmīrta d-Qāṭīne is not danced to; all gather around the minstrel with anticipation to learn what is to unfold next.

Although Donabed's thorough study demonstrates that Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne is worthy of the title 'epic' and see it befitting of the genre (Donabed 2007), one must be careful and recognize that the modern Assyrians only apply the terms "*Mšūḥat-gabbare*" or "*Humasa*," which would mean "Heroic Poem" and an "Epic" respectively—to the three volumes of Daniel, and never to the orally preserved version, known only as "Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne." Similarly, Gilgameš was also known to the Babylonians as "Zamartu," with epic being a conceptual modern term that we ascribe to it.

6.2 The Language of Qāṭīne

The minstrels of Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne employ the Modern Assyrian language as their medium to communicate it to their audience.

The Modern Assyrian language is often referred to as "Neo-Syriac" or "Neo-Aramaic." However, if one delves deeper into this remarkable language, one would realize its origins do not stem from Syriac, the liturgical language of the Christian Assyrians (Maclean 2003). Some of its features prove to be much more archaic than Syriac, and much of it "can be traced to antiquity in the Akkadian language" (Khan 2007, 7). Nor is it purely of Aramaic origin as is usually believed, based on the notion that Aramaic replaced the language of the Assyrian empire

³ Assyrian literary oral traditions have not yet been subjected to a study from a literary perspective, therefore there are no agreed English translations of the terms.

toward the last phase of its rule. Parpola assertively argues that what is believed to have replaced the Assyrian language during the late Neo-Assyrian period “was not the language spoken by the ethnic Arameans but a creation of (Assyrian) Empire” (Parpola 2004, 15). Rather than the notion of Aramaic replacing Assyrian, Fales views this as a process which formed an Assyrian/Aramaic symbiosis (Fales 1986, 46), and postulates the possibility of this language continuing even after the fall of the empire. The language of Zmīrta D’Qāṭīne confirms Fales’ conclusions as a language that survived the fall of the empire. Thus it should be referred to by its cultural character, that is, Modern-Assyrian or Assyrian-Aramaic as is often argued by modern Assyrian scholars (Ashitha 2007; Lamassu 2007; Odisho 2003).

Early scholarship erroneously advanced the idea that Assyrian was first written down by Rev. Justin Perkins, a missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the winter of 1834–1835 (Stoddard 2004, 3). Murre-Van De Berg, however, has correctly argued for an earlier period and pinpoints this to the late sixteenth century (Murre-Van de Burg 1998). Ashitha on the other hand is convinced that this was done much earlier, relying on an Assyrian manuscript dating to the earlier fifteenth century, and he goes as far as postulating a much earlier beginning, based on the findings of alphabetical Assyrian inscriptions appearing on potsherds dating to the Sassanian Period, and now in the possession of the Iraqi Museum (Ashitha 2007, 107).

6.3 The Name Qāṭīne

Hozaya believes the name Qāṭīne is derived from the Akkadian word *qātu*, which can mean both hand and scepter in modern Assyrian (Hozaya 1996, 71). This folk-etymology is an implausible assertion and fails to demonstrate the logic behind such an association. Donabed (2007, n. 351) on the other hand correctly recognizes it as deriving from the Semitic trilateral root “qtn”⁴ but fails to explain the rationale behind the cultural psyche which named our hero as such. The modern Assyrian dictionaries define Qāṭīne⁵ to mean frail, weak, meagre, and petite (Payne-Smith 1903; Ashitha 1997; Audo 1979), but how can one explain this if our hero is described in the Zmīrta as:

⁴Which would mean: small/thin. See (Orel and Stolbova 1994).

⁵In modern Assyrian dictionaries, Qāṭīne—a cognate of Akkadian *qatānu* and Hebrew קטר —is found under qtn, as qatṭīna with a pṭāxā vowel causing the gemination of the “t”. The change of the short pṭāxā vowel to a long zqāpā vowel, and the loss of gemination is a phenomenon of the modern Assyrian language, see (Murre-Van de Burg 1999), see also (Hozaya 1999, 20).

Qāṭīne qāṭe tūre
 Kūl sanbūlte pampūlte
 'u-kūl sanbūlte ḥa drā'ā

Qāṭīne the mountain leaper
 Each (side) of his moustache is a cubit
 And (a cubit) each of his shoe, and boot
 (Adam 2001, Audio Recording)

ānā wēn gūra m-gūre
 petwānī⁶ zā'ed l-ḥūre

I am the (ideal) warrior among warriors
 The width of my chest extends the height of poplars
 (Qasrani and Daresh 1998, Audio Recording)

This can only be explained if one realizes that the name Qāṭīne is nothing but a pun referring to the mortal aspect of a mortal possessing supernatural powers.

6.4 The Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne

Qāṭīne's paternal lineage is not known and the bare mention of his father is avoided, while a prominent emphasis is made on his maternal pedigree.⁷ Qāṭīne's mother is of royal blood and she is the king's sister. How exactly she falls pregnant is not clarified, but the king has been warned about the birth of his nephew and he fears Qāṭīne—who demonstrates extraordinary deeds right from his birth—for he is warned that he will grow to usurp his throne. Therefore he plots to kill him but Qāṭīne is miraculously saved by wild animals. Then Qāṭīne ends up in the court of another king, T'ūma, who is also his uncle but is unaware of this fact despite the affinity he feels toward him. Other than having been asked to dig wells in rocky mountains, an almost impossible task, immediately after Qāṭīne's success, King T'ūma, lobbied by the city elders, presents him with a series of daring challenges:

⁶In a private conversation with Rabi Daniel Dawed Bet Benjamin, the chief editor of *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies'* Assyrian section, he suggested that "petwānī" should be understood as "the distance of my leap" and not as "the width of my chest." To me they both seem plausible and they both emphasize the physical abilities of Qāṭīne.

⁷This brief outline is based on the recordings of the following minstrels: Mr. Khnanya Qasrani (Wellington, NZ), Mr. Taoma d-Wela (Dohuk, Iraq), Mrs. Regina Tawar (LA, California), Mr. Dawed Adam (Stockholm, Sweden), Mrs. Awigo Sulaqa (London, UK), and Mr. Delman Givargisov (Tiflis, Georgia). I would like to recognize the assistance of Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Mr. Jorje Darash, and the Assyrian Academic Society of Tehran for furnishing me with some of these recordings.

Tū T'ūma tū Qāṭīne
 Tīwēna ḥālā 'u-štāyā
 Ban bahāse bedrāya
 Aydīle gāwra m-gūre
 'u-petwāne zā'ed l-ḥūre
 Šāwērre bāzā d-šwērrī
 Šātēle qadḥa d-štēlī
 'u-gūrūte maḥ də-dīyī
 'u-raḥmūte maḥ də-dīyī

T'ūma sat, so did Qāṭīne
 They are sitting, eating and drinking
 Talking of heroic deeds
 Who is (an ideal warrior) among warriors
 whose chest extends the height of poplars
 To leap the jump which I have leaped
 To drink the chalice I have drunk
 Whose manhood is my equal
 Whose friendship⁸ equals mine
 (Qasrani and Daresh 1998, Audio Recording)

Qāṭīne accepts the challenges and always seeks the counsel of his mother and sister before embarking on his heroic journeys:

Way yemmī pīlī zwāde
 Way ḥātī wūdīlī kāde
 ḥdā 'ūrḥa mpelta l-bālī
 mḥūzdāwēn l-T'ūma ḥālī

Oh mother, bake me supplies
 Oh sister prepare me cakes
 My mind is set on a journey
 I have been challenged by my uncle T'ūma
 (Qasrani and Daresh 1998, Audio Recording)

The challenges are numerous. Perhaps the most significant would be Qāṭīne's battle with Yū'ānis the Armenian who had eloped with his beautiful aunt, and the battle with Lēlīta accompanied by Xūlikkū, his other uncle whom

⁸This can also be translated as “whose sexual performance,” “whose libido” equals mine. The noun is derived from the root *rḥm*, which can mean to love, to befriend, to be merciful, but in Assyrian oral literature, especial the Rāwe genre, sexual connotation is always implied, thus *rḥīmalī* would mean “I made love to her” rather than “I befriended her” or “showed her compassion.”

is captured in the forest mountain by Lēlīta, the evil creature. In the labyrinth of Lēlīta, Qāṭīne is to find the special plant said to open the eyes of the blind and rejuvenate the the aged:

'ayma-le gawra d-gūre
 d-šāwēre gāre gāre
 pā'ed men peṭṭa l-peṭṭa
 šātēle demmā w-qadḥa
 'āsēq l-karma d-Lēlīta
 Lēlīta mazdānīta
 'āwēd bāqā d-rēḥāne
 dāre b-'īda d-pātyāne
 'āyne gūhre pātēḥ lay
 mīte d'-qawrq mnaḥem-lay

Who is (an ideal) warrior among warriors
 To leap from rooftop to rooftop
 Cross from meadow to meadow
 Drink the blood and the chalice
 Climb up to Lēlīta's orchard
 The fearsome Lēlīta
 To grab a bunch of basil
 And hand it to those laying (on their deathbed)
 So it opens the eyes of the blind
 And raises the dead from the grave
 (Hozaya 1996, 78)

On his way to Lēlīta, Qāṭīne is approached by a rabbit proposing to befriend him.⁹ He utterly refutes her proposal. Once Qāṭīne reaches Lēlīta's orchard, he challenges her to a fight: Lēlīta is to strike first and she does this with her daglock "kāla",¹⁰ which she pulls out from her hindquarters. Qāṭīne manages to jump up as high as the heavens just in time and Lēlīta's daglock misses him and lands where Qāṭīne was standing creating a great chasm. This leads Lēlīta to think she has destroyed Qāṭīne, leaving not a single trace of him, but Qāṭīne lands back and kills her.

Many challenges are placed before Qāṭīne by his uncle T'ūma, but all of T'ūma's plots fail and Qāṭīne always comes out as the victorious hero. However, the wounded Lēlīta curses Qāṭīne just before her death. Lēlīta's curse is for Qāṭīne

⁹ Again the same verb "rḥm" is used, which could also have sexual connotations.

¹⁰ Mesopotamian sheep have fatty tails. Their feces, especially during the winter periods, get stuck on the wool of their tails and eventually form a sizable rock-like ball.

to die as a young unwedded bachelor. The curse is fulfilled when Qāṭīne is wounded when a shepherd shoots an arrow in his back as he was about to set off on another challenge.

6.5 Parallels, Points of Contact and Influences

As already indicated in this chapter, this marvelous oral epic of Qāṭīne has not been fully documented, and what has been presented here is based on the few recordings this writer has managed to gather over the last few years. It is through these few incomplete recordings that we have managed to render a brief comparative overview of both Qāṭīne and Gilgameš, and the parallels presented below. The present writer is confident that once Qāṭīne is fully documented and a more comprehensive study has been made, more of these parallels will surface, but for now the similarities presented below suffice to draw our attention to the importance of this rather neglected oral epic.

- Zmīrta D'Qāṭīne, like Gilgameš, is a sung epic and every minstrel's version is different, although the overall themes are preserved.
- Qāṭīne's birth is identical to that of Gilgameš as mentioned in Aelian's works: the miraculous birth that is feared by his uncle, the king who intends to have him killed, but the child is saved by an animal (George 2003, 61).
- There is resonance in many passages that seem to be in agreement almost verbatim, for example:

Who is the finest among men?
 Who the most glorious of fellows?
 Gilgameš is the finest among men!
 Gilgameš the most glorious of fellows!
 (George 1999, 54)

'aynile gawra m-gūre
 'aynile berya m-gūre
 'āna-wēn gawra m-gūre
 'āna-wēn berya m-gūre

Who is man amongst men
 Who is born of men
 I am man amongst men
 I am born of men
 (d'Wila 1988, Audio Recording)

If we restore the fragmentary line of 127 from the Standard Babylonian Version of Gilgameš as:

*ina ku-bur zib-ba-ti-šú [ka]-bu-us-su [id-di]*¹¹

And, like the CAD, translate the passage as: “with the thick part of his tail he flicked his excrement,” we will then have both Xumbaba and Lēlīta using the daglock of their tails to strike their opponents.

- Qāṭīne battles with Yû'ānis, the Armenian, whose name may be a play on words referring to Ayanis, the Urartian capital situated on Lake Van, which is within the vicinity of where the Noah's ark is generally believed to have landed. With further documentation this may prove to be a reference to the flood story. The causes of Qāṭīne's battle with Yûḥānis, and Qāṭīne's death, bear clear resemblance to the Odyssey. Qāṭīne and Xūlikkū's adventure in the mysterious orchard of the fearsome Lēlīta also corresponds well with Gilgameš, and Enkidu's adventure of Xumbaba in the cedar forest.
- Gilgameš is approached by Ištar whom he refutes just as Qāṭīne refutes the Rabbit's proposal to befriend/love her. Rabbit's fertility is taken to represent the mother goddess in many cultures, and Qāṭīne's Rabbit is none other than Gilgameš's Ištar.
- Other than opening passages in the mountains, and digging wells in the uplands like Gilgameš, Qāṭīne also seeks a special plant called Kerīta, Sīsīsāmbur or Reḥāna. The various names of this special plant depend on the minstrel and the region of her/his origin, also reiterate our argument. Reḥāna, which means basil, itself being a noun based on the trilateral root “rwḥ” may be a pun too, for “rwḥ” could mean both breath or life (Audio 1979; Payne-Smith 1903). Sīsīsāmbur on the other hand is a fragrant wild plant (Audio 1979), which grows around water streams and is borrowed from the Greek “Sysimbrium.”¹² The opting of this Sīsīsāmbur does not seem to be accidental either for it is believed to mutate and change form upon aging (Poortman and Drossaart Lulofs 1989, 60, 106). All this resonates well with Gilgameš's plant, which he names as “Old man grown young,” thus the mutation of the plant is seen as a mark of something old turning young. As for Kerīta, it is probably a description of the same thing for it is based on the noun Kerya, which means stream, exactly where

¹¹This restoration is adopted by the CAD, Parpola (1997, 31, 93) and Dalley (1998b, 81). George, however, is skeptical and believes that restorations put forward by other scholars are also plausible (George 2003, 841).

¹²The modern Assyrian dictionaries give the following meanings: water-mint (Audio 1979); the same meaning is given in Mandaic (Drower 1963), and Persian (Akbar 1955). The Latin dictionary gives the following: “a fragrant herb sacred to Venus: wild thyme, or mint” (White 1876).

Sīṣīšāmbur is said to grow and where Gilgameš is said to have lost his plant to the snake.

These similarities between Qāṭīne, Gilgameš and the classical Greek literature should not be perceived simply as literary topos. The opinion proposed here is that they should be construed as plausible intermediate landing stages, which may explain the many parallels between our epic of Gilgameš and Homeric literature. Sīṣīšāmbur as a loanword could also postulate two way traffic in terms of influence, possibly something similar to the legend of Aḥīqar which influenced later Greek and Latin literature in terms of Aesop, only to be borrowed back into Assyrian as Syntipas (Brock 1979, 7).

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