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May the Reader Not Withhold the Tablet!
On a Formula in Late Babylonian Colophons

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Most cuneiform literary tablets contain copies of texts on earlier tablets. However, many of them include a part that, by definition, cannot have been copied: the colophon. Especially in the Late Babylonian period, colophons feature many unusual and learned writings, which have usually been regarded as a display of the scribe's learnedness and ingenuity. This article offers a study of one such formula, and lists all known examples of it – totaling almost thirty, some of which were previously undeciphered. The group study of these colophons shows that the specific way in which the formula is written depends on the city and period in which the scribe lived. Thus, in the case of the formula under study Achaemenid tablets from Uruk use very learned writings, whereas early Hellenistic tablets from the same city contain straightforward, syllabic spellings. This pattern of distribution suggests that the interpretation of colophons as playgrounds for the scribes' own imagination should to some extent be reappraised.

Keywords: Colophons, scholarship, scribes

The overwhelming majority of literary cuneiform tablets are copies of other tablets.[1] This means that they do not reflect a scribe's attempt at composing a new text, but rather his desire to reproduce his original as faithfully as possible. There is, however, a section of many literary tablets that must be different from that of its original: the colophon. The colophon is a para-textual note that often appears at the end of literary tablets and informs the reader of the circumstances in which the copy was made. Since these circumstances vary from copy to copy, the colophon was adapted for each occasion.

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[1] Thanks are expressed to H. Hunger and M. Frazer, who read this paper and made important suggestions and corrections. The latter also made available photos of VAT 248+ (SBH 14). The following abbreviations are used in this paper: BAK = Hunger 1968; CCP = Cuneiform Commentaries Project (http://ccp.yale.edu; the records can be accessed using the CCP numbers as the URL path, e.g., http://ccp.yale.edu/3.1.20.B.b for CCP 3.1.20.B.b).

This does not mean, of course, that all colophons were composed *ex novo*. The type of information contained in them, as well as its specific formulation, depended on factors beyond the scribe's own ingenuity. Most importantly, it depended on the period and city in which the scribe lived. Colophons on tablets from some cities and periods display writings and formulae particular to the time and place in which they were written. Such is the case with certain curse formulae written in a learned and playful fashion, which appear only in colophons from certain cities and periods. Thus, for instance, the verb *lā itabbal* 'may he not carry (the tablet) off' is written with the highly learned sequence of signs ḪI-TA-ÁB-30-NAGAR (= *i₁₁-ta-áb-bà-alla*), *vel sim.*, only in Achaemenid and early Hellenistic tablets from the city of Uruk.[2] Similarly, the verb *lā ipaššiṭ* 'may he not erase (the tablet)' appears as NU (5-)GÍN-ŠID (= *là* (*i-*)*paš*ₓ*-šiṭ*) only in Hellenistic tablets from Babylon.[3] Both these writings appear in colophons from different scribes and families within the same city and period, which suggests regarding them as a case of Zeitgeist, rather than the result of individual innovation.

The purpose of this note is to discuss another formula that appears in certain colophons from Uruk, Babylon, and Borsippa during the Achaemenid and Early Hellenistic periods. The most interesting feature of the formula is that each of those cities seems to have adopted one, and only one, variant of it during a certain period. The variants range from straightforward syllabic renderings to sophisticated playful writings. The formula itself reads:

> *ina mērešti lā uša(m)ki/aš(šu)*   'May he not *withhold* (the tablet) delibrately!'

The expression *ina mērešti*, which is attested almost exclusively in this context, means 'deliberately.' The interpretation of the verb *uša(m)ki/aš(šu)* will be discussed below. Writings of the verb with -*šam*- and -*ki*(*š*)-*šú* are at-

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[2] See Hunger 1968:4f. and 48, no. 115 and Hunger 1990:34f. The writing is attested in three tablets of Anu-ikṣur, SpTU 1, 33 (CCP 4.1.7.B), SpTU 2, 8 (no. 27 below) and SpTU 5, 248 (no. 28 below); and one tablet of a member of the Sîn-lēqi-unninni family, TCL 6, 48 (BAK 115).

[3] Finkel 2007:30. Note, in addition to the four examples of this formula collected by Finkel also (1) BM 45746 rev. 9′ (Jiménez forthcoming); (2) BM 45744 (CT 16, 50): [*pa-liḫ*] ⌜30 *u* 20⌝ GIŠ NU *i-paš*ₓ-*šiṭ* (on the reading of the sign GIŠ, see George 1997:141, fn. 41); (3) Rm.716+ Rm.761 (unpubl., transliterated in W. G. Lambert's Folio 9212, dated "141st year of Antiochus and Antiochus," i. e., 171/170 B. C. E.); and (4) BM 45642 (published in George–Frame 2005:268 and 270). Note also that BM 36318, transliterated by Finkel, was previously published by Verderame 2002:49 and pl. IV 5–6 (which is to be corrected following Finkel's readings).

tested only in tablets of the Ēkur-zākir family, from Hellenistic Uruk. The following examples are known.

(1) [*pa-liḫ* ᵈIŠKUR *u* ᵈŠÚ NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-ti-šú*] | *la ú-šam-kiš-šú* (SpTU 4, 147 l. 2′, only colophon preserved; scribe Ištar-šuma-ēreš s. Iqīšāya)

(2) ⌜*pa-liḫ*⌝ ᵈIŠKUR *u* ᵈŠÚ NU TÙM-*šú*⌐ *ina me-reš-ti-šú la ú-šam-* ⌜*kiš-šú*⌝ (SpTU 4, 158 rev. 17′, Koch[-Westenholz] 2005:458; owner Iqīšāya)

(3) *pa-liḫ* ᵈ*a-nu-um* ᵈSÌ⁴ *u* ᵈIDIM NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-ti-šú la ú-šam-kiš-šú* (SpTU 2, 6 l. 48, cf. Farber 1987:31f.; owner Iqīšāya, scribe Ištar-šuma-ēreš s. Iqīšāya. See also SpTU 2, 9 rev. 30)

(4) *pa-liḫ* ᵈ*a-nu* ᵈ*en-líl u* ᵈIDIM NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-ti-šú la ú-šam-kiš-šú* (Bod S 302 ll. 58–61, *RA* 12:[75], BAK 97; same owner and scribe, dated 23/I/316 B. C. E.)

(5) MUD ᵈ60 *u* U.MU.UN NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-ti-šú* NU *ú-šam-ki-šú* (VAT 7825 rev. 13′–14′, *AfO* 14 pl. vi, CCP 3.1.20.B.b, BAK 91; owner Anu-balāssu-iqbi s. Anu-aḫa-ittannu d. Aḫuʾūtu, scribe his son Tanitti-Anu, dated 3/II/232 B. C. E.)

(6) [*pa-liḫ* ᵈ60] *u an-tum li-iṣ-ṣur u li-šá-qir ina šur-qa* NU [TÙM-*šú* | *ina me*]-*reš-ti-šú la ú-šam-ki-šú* (TCL 6, 10 rev. 3′–4′, BAK 96; scribe Nidinti-Anu s. Anu-bēlšunu d. Ēkur-zākir, dated 4/[…]/222–221 B. C. E.)

(7) *pa-lìḫ* ᵈ60 *u an-tum* ḪÉ.ÙRU *u li₆-šá-qí-ir ina šur-qa* NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-ti-šú la ú-šam-ki-šú* (TCL 6, 1 rev. 58–59, BAK 96, Koch[-Westenholz] 2005:209; owner Anu-balāssu-iqbi s. Anu-aḫa-ittannu d. Aḫuʾūtu, scribe Nidinti-Anu s. Anu-bēlšunu d. Ēkur-zākir, dated 4/II/221 B. C. E.)

Colophons 1–4 were all written by Ištar-šuma-ēreš, son of Iqīšāya, of the Ēkur-zākir family, whose dated colophons range from 318 to 316 B. C. E. (Clancier 2009:53). In all of them the verb is written as *ú-šam-kiš-šú*. Examples 5–7 belong to tablets produced by scribes of two closely related families, the Ēkur-zākir and the Aḫuʾūtu. They were all produced in the second half of the 3rd century B. C. E., and in all of them the verb appears as *ú-šam-ki-šú*. In all seven known colophons from Hellenistic Uruk the adverbial phrase contains a possessive, *ina mēreštīšu*, lit. "with his intention," whereas in the rest of the known instances of the formula no possessive is added.

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⁴ Comparison with colophon no. 4 suggests that the writing ᵈSÌ corresponds to Enlil. The writing originates no doubt in the relatively common writing of the god's name as ᵈSI (on this writing, see Frahm 2011:140, fn. 692).

Tablets from the British Museum's "Sippar Collection," all of which appear to stem from Borsippa, write the verb studied here as *ú-šá-kaš*, rather than *ú-šam-ki(š)-šú*:

(8) [*pa-li*]-*iḫ* ᵈMU.DÙG.GA.S[A₄]. ⌜A⌝ [*ina*] SAR-*tú*[5] *la i-tab-bal* | [*u ina me-r*]*eš-tú la ú-šá-kaš* (BM 33851 iv 4′–5′ (STC 2 pl. lxvi = BWL pl. 27, BAK 133) + BM 76672 (unpubl.); scribe Nabû-kuṣuršu s. B[ēl-ēriba d. Ḫ]uṣabi, dated to […]/XI/457 or 397)

(9) [*pa-liḫ* …] | ⌜*ina me*⌝ -*reš-tú la ú-šá-k*[*aš* …] (BM 65466 rev. 22′–23′, CT 38, 9, BAK 450; scribe Nabû-[…])

(10) *pa-liḫ* ᵈPA *ina* SAR-*tum* NU GIŠ[6] *ù ina me-reš-tum la ú-šá-kaš* (BM 78239 rev. 25′, CT 44, 17, BAK 423; owner Bēl-ikṣur s. Bēl-iškunanni d. Iddin-Papsukkal)

(11) *pa-li*[*ḫ*ⁱ o o o o o o] *ina*ⁱ *me*ⁱ-*reš-tum* | [*l*]*a*ⁱ *ú*-[*šá-kaš* …] (BM 64188+ vi 24–25, Bloch–Horowitz 2015:117f., read from photograph; scribe (*qa*ⁱ-*at*) Nabû-iddin […] d. […]-bāni)

Although only one of these examples is dated – no. 8 –, it seems likely that all of them date to the Achaemenid period. In view of the writing *ú-šam-ki(š)-šú* in examples 1–7, it may appear attractive to read KAŠ in these cases as *kiš*ₓ (or *keš*ₓ), given the well-known Neo- and Late Babylonian phenomenon of the use of CVC signs for representing any vowel.[7] However, the two following example advise against it, since the verb studied here is written with CV-VC signs:

(12) *pa-liḫ* ⌜ᵈAG⌝ *u* ᵈ*gu*- ⌜*la*⌝ *ina* ⌜*mé-reš-tum*⌝ *la*ⁱ *ú-šá-ka-áš* (BM 28944 rev. 1′–2′, Finkel 1999:219ff. and 244; owner Kidinnu-Marduk s. Nabû-mukīn-apli d. … […])

(13) [*pa-l*]*iḫ* ᵈPA *u* ᵈ*nissaba ina qé-reb*[8] [NU] GIŠ *u ina me-reš-tum la ú-šá-k*[*a-áš*] (BM 42273 rev. 16′, Matuszak 2012:142f. and 151f.; owner *Erība*-Nabû s. Marduk-šumu-iddina d. Marduk-*šāk*[*in-šumi*])[9]

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[5] *ina* SAR-*tú* is usually interpreted as *ina sārti* 'dishonestly,' but Borger 1969:166 convincingly proposed understanding it as *ina ḫubti* 'as a robbery' (SAR = *ḫubtu*).

[6] NU GIŠ(-*šú*) could be transcribed as *lā inaššīšu* (GIŠ = GUR₁₇), or else as *lā itabbalšu* (as suggested by Lambert *apud* Maul 2005:30). Note that the colophon of the Lamaštu amulet "Ah," read as TÙM!? by Wiggermann 2000:241, fn. 179 and Farber 2014:33, is probably to be read as *šá* GIŠ-*ú-šú*, which suggests taking the verb as *ša inaššûšu*. See also below fn. 8.

[7] E. g., MAR for /*mir*/ or ŠUQ for /*šaq*/, see Streck 2001:81f. and Magdalene–Wunsch 2013:102.

[8] *ina* KI.KAL NU GIŠ-*šú* appears also in Lambert 1983:213 l. 26 (= BAK 146, tablet of Bēl-zēru-līšir s. Bēl-abu-uṣur and written by his son Bēl-uballissu dated 15/VI/287 B. C. E.); and in Böck 2007:207 A rev. 32: *pa-liḫ* E[N *u*] ᵈGAŠAN-*ià ina* KI.KAL NU T[Ù]M-*šú* (tablet of Tanittu-Bēl, dated 324 B. C. E.). Note also *ina qé-*

(14) *pa-liḫ* d+AG *ina* SAR-*tu₄* NU ÍL-*šú ina me-* ⌜*reš*⌝ -*tú la ú-šá-ka-áš*
(BM 48053, courtesy of Sam Mirelman, perhaps from Achae-
menid Borsippa)

Tablets nos. 8–11 all appear to stem from Borsippa, and to date to the
Achaemenid period. This may also be the case of nos. 12–14. The scribe of
no. 8, Nabû-kuṣuršu son of Bēl-erība descendant of Ḫuṣābi, is also the
author of four further Achaemenid tablets from Borsippa with a very similar
formula. In it the rare verb *uša(m)ki/aš(šu)* is replaced by the more common
kalû 'to withhold.' This verb is also attested in the formula of no. 19 below,
which was apparently written by a different Borsippean scribe:

(15) [*pa-liḫ* d+AG *ina* SAR-*tú*] NU GIŠ *ina me-reš-tú* NU *i-kal-lu* (BM 76022
rev. 24, TDP pl. iii, ed. Heeßel 2001–2002:37, BAK 131; scribe
[Nabû-kuṣuršu d. Ḫuṣābi], dated to Artaxerxes)

(16) *pa-liḫ* d+EN *u* d+AG *ina* SAR-*tú* NU GIŠ-*šú u ina me-reš-tum la i-kal-li*
(BM 92693 iv 49, CT 12, 3, BAK 124; scribe Nabû-kuṣuršu s. Bēl-
erība d. Ḫuṣābi, dated to Artaxerxes 10th, i. e. 454 or 394 B. C. E.)

(17) *pa-liḫ* d+AG *ina* SAR-*tú* NU GIŠ *u ina me-reš-tú* NU *i-kal-li* (BM 92691 iv
32, CT 12, 11, BAK 128; same scribe as above)

(18) *pa*ˈ-*liḫ* d+AG *ina me-re-eš-ti* NU GUL (BM 93037 iv 44, CT 12, 7,
BAK 126; same scribe as above)

(19) [*pa-liḫ* d]AMAR.UTU *ina me-reš-tum la i-kal-lu* (BM 54825 rev. 5´,
unpubl.;[10] scribe Bēl-lēˈi-kalāma)

The use of the verb *kalû* in colophons seems to be restricted to these
five cases.[11] The closeness of the formulation to colophons that use *ú-šá-kaš*,
as well as the fact that the same scribe uses both verbs in different colo-
phons, suggests that the approximate meaning of the difficult verb *ú-šá-kaš*
is probably 'to withhold.'[12]

GAL NU TÙM-*šú* (in Böck 2007:169 F rev. 23´ and 255 A rev. 30) and *ina šur*ₓ(SAR)-
q[*í* N]U T[ÙM-*šú*] (ibid. 297 B iv 9´, see also the discussion in Finkel 1991:95). In
these texts *ina* KI.KAL occupies the slot otherwise occupied by *šurqu* 'theft,' but
there seems to be no obvious way of deriving *šurqu* from KI.KAL. Moreover, the
writing *qé*-GAL is likely to be read as *qé-reb*ₓ(GAL), as noted by Finkel 1991:95 (note
the reading *ráb* of GAL), which suggests reading the other instances as *ina qé-reb*,
difficult to interpret though it may be ('may he not steal (the tablet) from the cen-
ter (of the place where it is kept)'). On NU GIŠ(-*šú*) see fn. 6.

[9] Reference courtesy of D. Schwemer.

[10] The tablet is transliterated in W. G. Lambert's Folio 9948.

[11] Hunger 1968:164a. On the use of *kalû* with the meaning 'to withhold a
document, a tablet,' see CAD K 100a and AHw. 428b 4c.

[12] Note, however, also the writing *pa-liḫ* dAMAR.UTU *ù* d*zar-pa-*[*ni-tum* o o o] | *ù*
[*ina*] *mé-reš-tum* NU TÙM, in BM 45528+ rev. 45´ (STC 2 pl. vi+, see Lambert

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The latest datable colophons containing a formula related to that studied here appear on Achaemenid and Hellenistic tablets from Babylon.[13] The related formula reads:

ina mēresti la lìb-bi lā ušellēš(u) 'May he not remove it from within deliberately!'

The following colophons containing this formula are known:

(20) [*pa-liḫ* 20 *in*]*a qé-reb* NU GIŠ-*šú ina me-reš-tum* NU *lìb-bi la ú-še-l*[*e-šú*] (BM 32305 rev. 31´, Heeßel 2011:186; owner Bēl-apla-uṣur s. Nādin-aḫi d. […], dated 2/[…]/Artaxerxes 32, i. e. 433–432 or 373–372 B. C. E.)

(21) *pa-liḫ* ᵈUTU *u* ᵈ*nissaba ina qê*-r*[*eb** NU GIŠ-*šú*] | *ina me-reš-tum* NU *lìb-bi* NU *ú-šel-leš´* (BM 35408 rev. 16´–17´, LBAT 1571a, BAK 161, CCP 3.1.u17; owner Itti-Marduk-balāṭu s. [Iddin-Bēl d. Mušēzib (?)])

(22) *ina me-reš-tum la lìb-bi la ú-še-el-šú* (BM 45634 l. 40, CT 41, 42, CCP 3.4.9.M, BAK 168; owner Ea-uballissu s. Nabû-apla-iddin, *aškāpu* of the Ezida, dated 12/II/[…])

(23) [*pa*]-⌈*liḫ*⌉ ᵈAMAR.⌈UTU⌉ NU TÙM-*šú ina me-reš-tum* ⌈*la*⌉ *lìb-bi* NU *ú-*[*šel-leš*] (BM 36595+ l. 32, CCP 7.2.u103, Gabbay–Finkel–Jiménez 2015; owner Marduk-šar-ilī (?) s. Minû-ana-Bēl-dan d. Ile''i-[Marduk], dated 312/311 B. C. E.)

(24) [… *la lìb-bi*] | *la ú-šel-leš* (BM 55491 rev. 1´–2´, CCP 4.1.3B; dated to 9/VIII/266 B. C. E., in Babylon)

(25) *ina me-reš-tum la lìb-bi* | [*la ú-šel-leš šá* Í]L-*šú iṭ*-*ti* ITI-*šú ana* EN-*šú* | [GUR-*šú*] (BM 48881 + BM 49070 rev. 4´–6´, unpubl.)

(26) [*pa-liḫ* ᵈAG] *u* ᵈ*taš-me-tum ina šur-qa* NU GIŠ-*šú ina me-reš-tum* NU *lìb-bi* | [*lā ušellēš*] (BM 36319 rev. 13´, van Soldt 1995:40 and pl. 5; owner Iddin-Bēl s. Marduk-šāpik-zēri d. Mušēzib, dated to 175–170 B. C. E.)[14]

2013, pl. 5, BAK 422; owner Nabû-mušētiq-udda [...]). Besides the instances collected in this paper, this tablet contains the only other known attestation in colophons of the adverbial phrase *ina mēresti*. The writing with the logogram TÙM may suggest that *uša(m)ki/aš(šu)* is a synonym of *tabālu* 'to carry off,' rather than of *kalû* 'to withhold.'

[13] Note, however, that no. 22 seems to come from Borsippa.

[14] The tablet is dated to the '[...ᵗʰ year of An]tiochus the great king and Anti[ochus, his son].' A number of co-regencies of two Antiochus happened during the Seleucid period. However, the tablet accessed immediately before BM 36319, BM 36318+ (Verderame 2002:49 and pl. IV 5–6, see fn. 3 above), is dated to year 142 ([MU 1] *me* 42.KAMᵛ) of "Antiochus and Antiochus": this corresponds

Following a suggestion of H. Hunger, the formula is here read as *ina mērešti la libbi lā ušellēš(u)* 'he should not steal (the tablet) from within (it),'[15] understanding NU/*la* as the Neo-Babylonian preposition *la*.[16] The phrase *la libbi šūlû* is in fact attested in a Neo-Babylonian letter from Kuyunjik:

> (rev. 4) *ṭup-pa-a-ni ina* ⌜*pa-ni*⌝ (rev. 5) *šarri*(LUGAL) *bēlī*(EN)-*iá lul-si-ma* (rev. 6) *mim-ma šá pa-an šarri*(LUGAL) (rev. 7) *maḫ-ru a-na lìb-bi* (rev. 8) *lu-še-ri-da** : *mim-ma* (rev. 9) *šá pa-an šarri*(LUGAL) : *la maḫ-ru* (rev. 10) *la lìb-bi lu**-še-le* (rev. 5) 'Let me read (rev. 4) the tablets in the presence (rev. 5) of the king, my lord, (rev. 6) and (rev. 8) let me put down (rev. 7) in there (rev. 6) whatever is in the king's (rev. 7) interest. Whatever (rev. 9) is not in the king's interest, (rev. 10) I shall remove from there.' (ABL 334 = SAA 10, 373 (collated))[17]

Parallelism in this passage makes it clear that *la libbi šūlû*, lit. "to make something go up from the center," means the opposite of *ana libbi šūrudu*, lit. "to make something go down to the center." The possessive pronoun in nos. 20–26 (*ušellēš(u)*) suggests that both verbs may refer to the addition or removal of tablets to and from libraries, rather than to the addition or deletion of text to and from tablets. Therefore, *la libbi ušellēš* should perhaps be interpreted as 'may he not remove it (*sc.* the tablet) from within (its location).'

<div align="center">***</div>

The two last instances of the formula that will be studied here belong to colophons from the library of Anu-ikṣur, who was active in Uruk during the Achaemenid period, perhaps during the last quarter of the fifth century B. C. E. (Clancier 2009:58f.). Previous attempts at deciphering these colophons have failed to recognize them as parallels to the formula studied here:[18]

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to 170 B. C. E., during the co-regency of Antiochus IV and his son Antiochus (Parker–Dubberstein 1956:23, Boiy 2004:162). BM 36319 therefore dates probably to the same co-regency, i. e., to the period 175–170 B. C. E..

[15] A more remote possibility would be to read NU/*la* ŠÀ.BI as a playful writing for *lā šà-kaš*, i. e., *lā (u)šamkāš*. The omission of the preformative vowel would be paralleled by two instances of the formula NU *i-paš*ₓ(GÍN)-*šiṭ* (see above fn. 3), which appears twice as NU(-)*paš*ₓ-*šiṭ* (in SBH 14 rev. 52 and BM 33333b). This possibility, however, seems precluded by the passage in SAA 10, 373.

[16] Note the writing NU in nos. 20, 21, and 26, which appears to be elsewhere unattested for the preposition *la*.

[17] On this letter, see Oppenheim 1942:371f. and Lieberman 1990:309f.

[18] Compare for instance von Weiher 1983:50 and 55 (read [*u*²-*s*]*aḫ-ḫar*², after a suggestion of W. von Soden), Farber 1987:36, fn. 40 (read as *là* [*ú*]-*šam*¹-*ki*[*š*¹²-*šú*]),

(27) *pà-li-iḫ* AN.ŠÁR.GAL *ù* ᵈKI.ŠÁR.GAL ⌜NU *i*₁₁(ḪI)⌝ *-ta-áb-bà-alla* | *lu-ú ina mé-re-eš-tim* NU [*ú-š*]*a**-*gá-àš*(6) (SpTU 2, 8 iv 31´–32´; scribe Anu-ikṣur[19] s. Šamaš-iddina d. Šangû-Ninurta)

(28) [*pà-li-iḫ* ᵈAN].⌜ŠÁR⌝ *u* ᵈKI.ŠÁR NU *i*₁₁(ḪI)-*ta*₈(ŠÁR)**-áb-bà-alla*[20] | [*ina*] ⌜*me-re*⌝-*eš-ti* NU *ú-*⌜*ša-am*⌝*-àš*(6)[21] (SpTU 5, 248 rev. 43´–44´; scribe Anu-ikṣur s. Šamaš-iddina d. Šangû-Ninurta)

Both instances have been collated from photographs (see the adjoining drawing).[22] In these colophons both verbs are written in a bewildering way: whereas the first verb is written ḪI-TA/ḪI-ÁB-30-NAGAR (discussed above), the second appears as *ú-*⌜*ša-gá*⌝*-àš*, where the last syllable (*àš*) is actually the number 6, which in Sumerian is pronounced /aš/. The tablets written by Anu-ikṣur can be dated to the last quarter of the fifth century (Clancier 2009:58f.). In Uruk, the oldest instances of the formula are thus the most sophisticated.[23]

SpTU 2, 8 iv 32'
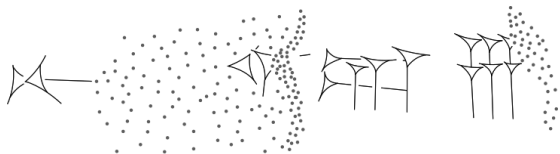
SpTU 5, 248 rev. 43'–44'

von Weiher 1998:60 and 65 (read *ú-ša*ⁱ*-am-šeššu*(6), as *mašû* Š), and Stevens 2013:240 and 241 with fnn. 13 and 16 (as *mašû* Š).

[19] Playfully written as ᵐ·ᵈ*ḫa-ḫar-num-ík*(E)*-ṣu-úr* (see Farber 1987:36ff.).

[20] The sign transliterated as *ta*₈ is the same archaizing form of ŠÁR that is used in the names of [ᵈAN].⌜ŠÁR⌝ and ᵈKI.ŠÁR (see the adjoining drawing). The rare reading *ta*₈ stems from the Akkadian equivalent of DÙG(ḪI) = *ṭābu*. Note, however, that the sign ḪI immediately before has its regular Neo-Babylonian shape, and not its archaizing form.

[21] The sign AM seems clear, and a reading *ú-ša-ga*ⁱ*-àš* seems epigraphically impossible. The word should probably be emended to *ú-ša-am-<ga>-àš*. It may also reflect a pronunciation *ušamʾaš*, as suggested by D. Schwemer (*privatim*).

[22] Photos of SpTU 5, 248 (IM 76830) were taken by Ammar Fadhil, and kindly made available by I. Wagner (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

[23] According to Oelsner 1996:438, the *pāliḫ*-formula is a northern Babylonian creation that was imported to Uruk, where it first appears in a colophon dated to 486 B. C. E. (SpTU 1, 86).

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Most the passages cited above seem to contain different writings of one and the same verb. The verb is, however, not easy to parse. The first uncertainty concerns the final -*š(u)*: is it a pronominal suffix or a radical of the verb? The former possibility is suggested by the alternation between -*šu* and -*š*; the latter by the difficulty of understanding -*iššu* in colophons 1–4 (*ú-šam-kiš-šú*) as a pronominal suffix, as well as by the absence of any suffix on the verb *kalû* in cases 15–19. The second problem is the co-existence of /a/ and /e/ vocalisms in the forms *ú-šam-ki(š)-šú* and *ú-šá-kaš*: this co-existence can be explained either by parsing the forms as an *e*-verb,[24] or else as a result of the well-known Neo- and Late-Babylonian shift /a/ > /e/.[25]

No root x-*k*-*š* with /e/ vocalism is known. Moreover, no suitable x-*k*-ʾ verb is attested in the Š stem. These two factors suggest that *uša(m)ki/aš(šu)* represents either an unknown verb or an unattested stem of a verb. The latter is the solution adopted by CAD M₁ 140b, AHw. 591a, and Hunger 1968:167a, where the verb is explained as an otherwise unattested Š stem of the rare verb *makû* 'to be lacking.' It would also be possible to parse it as *mekû* 'to neglect' (Š stem likewise unattested),[26] which has the advantage of having an /e/ vocalism that alternates with /a/. Be that as it may, it seems clear that the meaning of the verb is 'to remove,' 'to withhold,' *vel sim*.[27]

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As has been pointed out before,[28] the use of the term "cryptography" to describe highly learned and playful writings in colophons is inappropriate, since the writings do not seem to be intended to make the text they convey inaccessible. There is no particular reason why the information

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[24] The alternation between *ú-šam-ki(š)-šú* and *ú-šá-kaš* could then be regarded as a fluctuation between *a* and *e*, a phenomenon that occurs frequently in *e*-verbs (Kouwenberg 2010:525–537).

[25] On this shift, see Çağırğan–Lambert 1991:102 ad 93, Streck 1992:148, and George 2003:437.

[26] Both CAD M₂ 9a and AHw. 643a book a Št stem *mekû*, but the examples collected *ss.vv.* are too uncertain. CAD states: "The forms listed [s. v. *mekû* Št] have no plausible semantic connection with the verb *mekû*. Possibly they represent a quadriliteral *sutēmk/qû* (cf. *šutēršû*)." On this suppositious Št-tantum verb *šutēmkû*, see also Charpin 1984:48, Durand 1998:107, and Kouwenberg 2010:411.

[27] Note that the colophon of the tablet BM 42296, read by Finkel *apud* MSL 17, p. 65 as "[...] ⌜x⌝ DÉ-*šú* (= *lā ušamkīšu* ?) *a-na* BE-*šú* GUR?-*šú*," is to be read as [o o] x *ina** ITI*-*šú ana bēlīšu litēršu* (collated), and therefore does not contain the formula studied here.

[28] E. g. in Hunger 1976:11b and Hunger 1990:33.

contained in colophons should be concealed – on the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that a scribe would have wanted his colophon to stand out. A curse formula, for instance, makes little sense if it cannot be read; it would be purposeless to write the scribe's name in such a way that hinders or even prevents other readers from deciphering it. It seems more likely to assume, therefore, that unusual writings aimed not to hide the information in colophons, but rather to emphasize it. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico* – the reader who stumbles across the colophon, intrigued by its apparently hermetic contents, would make every effort to decipher them, thus making them all the more prominent.

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