Ninurta's Pride and Punishment

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[This article is the translation of the only preserved episode of a myth that describes the fight between Ninurta and the eaglet (Amar-Anzu) for the possession of the stolen tablets of destiny. Enki punishes Ninurta by having him fall into a pit dug by a turtle. The text is published in copy in UET 6/1 2.]

UET VI No. 2 contains part of the text of a Ninurta myth whose beginning and end were no doubt inscribed on tablets whose contents preceded and followed those of the extant piece, the contents of which may be sketched as follows: the first four lines contain the concluding part of an address by Amar-Anzu to Ninurta, informing him that, because he (Ninurta) had attacked it (the Amar-Anzu) violently "at his command", it dropped the me, the giš-šur, the "tablet of destiny", out of its hand, and these have thus been returned to the Abzu (lines 1-4). Stunned by this news, Ninurta laments the loss of the me and the powers that go with them, a bitter plaint whose implication Enki apprehended in the Abzu (lines 5-9). Rather surprisingly, we next find the Amar-Anzu taking his attacker Ninurta by the hand and "returning" him to the

1. To date only two duplicates of this text have been identified: a very small Nippur fragment published in S/EN 41 (see R.A 60 p.92) and a very small Ur fragment to be published by Aaron Shaffer in UET VII Part 3 that is, however, of little help; it reads as follows: Obv 1. e ... 2. me-mu ... 3. giš-šur-mu ... 4. dub-nam-tar-ra[mu] ... 5. ur-sag-nin-urta ... 6. me-ṣe-nki-gaššu ... 7. giš-šur-hi-m-e-a ... Rev 1. en-e ... 2. a-nam-[ur-sag] ... 3. sag-kaš-bal-[i]-ab ... 4. u-gal ... 5. u-g-tur ...

[CBS 8319, CBS 15007, and CBS 15085 are all parts of a three-column tablet that contained the entire myth, which must have been about 300 lines long. The script is extremely small and the surface very badly preserved, but it seems, from the few readable lines, that the Anzu bird, the me's and the tablets of destiny play a central role throughout the composition. M. Civi.]

2. To judge from these lines, some deity (either Enlil or Enki) had commanded Ninurta to attack Amar-Anzu. The reason for this command was no doubt Amar-Anzu's fetching the me from the Abzu, an episode that must have been related in one of the tablets preceding the extant Ur tablet.

3. Line 8 might perhaps be expected to state that being deprived of the me, he will have no hope of becoming Enki's equal, but the reading and meaning of the pronominal form in u - m - u - n - 3ab are uncertain, and the sense of the line remains obscure. As for line 9, its implication may be that Enki, upon hearing Ninurta's lamenting complaint, realized the danger he was in because of Ninurta's ambitious designs and was therefore put on his guard, as it were.

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Abzu (lines 10-12). There he is greeted joyously by Enki who blesses him as the victor over the “bird”, an uninvited hero whose name will be duly honored (lines 13-24). This blessing, however, does not satisfy the ambitious god who made secret, hostile plans against Enki (lines 25-30). The latter, realizing that Ninurta-meant to do him serious injury, sent his sukkal Isimud to eject him from the Abzu, but Ninurta not only refused to leave, but actually raised a hand against him (lines 31-35). Whereupon the troubled Enki fashioned a turtle out of the clay of the Abzu that proceeded to attack Ninurta who, however, counterattacked in self-defense (lines 36-41). Enki then had the turtle dig an “evil” pit into which he threw Ninurta alongside the turtle (lines 42-44). He then added insult to injury by denigrating the struggling Ninurta as a mountain-destroyer who could not climb out of a pit, and yet had dared to think of killing him (lines 45-54). But now Nimmenna, that is, Ninhursag, came to her son’s rescue. Reminding Enki, “the plant-eater”, that she had once saved his life, she no doubt demanded him to show his gratitude by delivering Ninurta from his sad predicament and saving his life.

TRANSLATION

1. “At his command your weapon struck me violently.
2. As I let go the me out of my hand, its me returned to the Abzu.
3. As I let go the giš-šur out of my hand, its giš-šur returned to the Abzu.
4. [Its tablet of destiny] returned to the Abzu, I was deprived of the me.
5. At the word of Amar-Anzu, the hero Ninurta was stunned.
6. [The paššā of An] utters a wail:
7. “As for me, its me have not come to my hand, I shall not exercise its (the Abzu’s) en-ship,
8. He did not let [me] ..., like him in the [shrine] Abzu
9. Father Enki in the Abzu knew the word he had spoken.

4. These lines seem to imply that Ninurta had been in the Abzu before: perhaps he had come there at Enki’s request in order to retrieve the me that had been carried off by Amar-Anzu.
5. Just what it was that Ninurta planned is not stated in the text, but to judge from line 49 he actually planned to kill Enki.
6. The assumption that the last four lines of our text are the introductory part of a plea by Ninmenna, that is, Ninhursag, to Enki that he save her son’s life is a reasonable surmise based primarily on line 60, which would render “Pitless death -- you, who has carried it off from you!” (note that the verbal form m u-ra-ab-ti u m may be rendered either as “who has brought it to you” or by the diametrically opposite “who has carried it off from you”; cf., e.g., lines 88-89 of Dilu Lugalbanda). According to this line, therefore, Ninhursag is reminding Enki that she had once saved his life. Now as is known from “Enki and Ninhursag: A Sumerian Myth,” Ninhursag had indeed saved Enki’s life by giving birth to the eight deities who healed Enki’s eight ailing organs after he had eaten the eight plants generated by the goddess from her semen. This explains the goddess’ designation of Enki in line 57 as u-k i-k i “plant-eater” (admittedly, however, the m u-uš following u-ki-k i is difficult). The expression “my plant-eater” seems rather strange; note, too, that m u-uš may be the Emesal for giš “tree” or “penis”, but neither of these meanings fit the context. As for lines 58-59, the rendering assumes that they contain a depiction of death personified at least in part (note the use of ti, but followed by -bi as the possessive). [Civil suggests reading [t]in-[m e-n]-na, instead of [p a-s-s-š-a]-na, and I tend to agree with him]
7. The text has been collated and translated by Bendt Altman (evidently with some help from Thorkild Jacobsen, cf. his comments to lines 28 and 59 in KJS 2419721 120ff. My translation and interpretation differ considerably; in most instances the reasons for the difference will be readily apparent to the cuneiformist, where this may not be so an explanatory comment will be found in the notes.
8. “Ts” in this line and the two following refers to the Abzu.
9. Altman’s restoration of d u-b-n a-m-ta r-ra is now confirmed by Obv. 4 of the Ur fragment mentioned in note 1. Note that the me, the giš-šur, and the d u-b-n a-m-ta r-ra seem to be treated as synonymous by the author.
10. Note that the first complex is to be restored (medin a-m a r-a-n u-se, and that since it is a genitive compound, one might have expected a -da preceding -šé. “Stunned” is the rendering for Is 1-aš-st.
11. Preceding abzu-a, šé-e should probably be restored.
12. If the rendering of this line is correct, “en-k i” is an error for “en-k i-ke” and the -da of the verbal form is not accounted for.

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10. Amar-Anzu took the hero Ninurta by the hand  
11. Approached with him to Enki’s place, the Abzu,  
12. Utuulu was (thus) returned to the Abzu by Amar-Anzu.  
13. The Lord rejoiced for the hero  
14. Father Enki rejoiced for the hero.  
15. The lord Nudim[mud] addresses him [affectionately]:  
16. “Hero! No god among [your] brother gods would have done so.  
17. As for the bird which your mighty weapon has pinioned  
18. [You will set] your foot upon its neck from now to eternity.  
20. May your father Enil perform [your] command (??),  
21. May Ninmenna not fashion your likeness,  
22. May she let no one possess awesomeness like you, may she let no one grasp(?) it (awesomeness(??)) before you.  
23. Monthly may your ... be constant in the shrine Abzu,  
24. May your name be pronounced in the seat of honor”.  
25. The hero -- his heart rejoiced not at this blessing.  
26. At his post, how(?) (his) face darkens, how it pales!  
27. His heart turns over great things, his heart is hostile.  
28. He ...d not his ..., he ...d his body,  
29. The hero Ninurta set his face towards the entire world,  
30. He told no one, his heart did not ...  
31. The great lord Enki, in his own heart, understood the meaning of the plan,  
32. In his shrine Abzu he agitated billowing waves.  
33. The sukkat Isimud threatened(?) him by the house.  
34. The hero Ninurta refuses to come out,  
35. Raised his hand against Isimud.  
36. Enki fashioned a turtle against him from the clay of the Abzu.  
37. He stationed the turtle against him at the entrance, the gate of the Abzu,

13. It is difficult to reconcile the statement in this line with that in line 17, unless “the bird” of line 17 is not identical with Amar-Anzu.  
14. The -ši- of ba-ši-ši-šu1 seems to recapitulate the -ra of the preceding complex.  
15. Following GLT, the copy has SI, and this is confirmed by my photograph of the tablet; there is little doubt, however, that this is a scribal error for ZU.  
16. While the general sense of the passage in lines 25-30 is quite clear, that is, the ambitious Ninurta, dissatisfied with Enki’s rather unexciting benediction secretly devised hostile schemes against Enki, it includes numerous grammatical and lexical difficulties that make its translation rather problematic. Thus the meaning of the -bi of ša-Ši in lines 25, 27, and 30; the -bi of ka-da-Ši-Ši and bar-Ši in line 28, and of igi-Ši in line 29, is rather uncertain; my rendering assumes that in all these cases it is an error for (a-ni), an assumption that makes the rendering more than doubtful. (After, on the other hand, renders ša-Ši as “secretly”, which makes excellent sense, but is grammatically unjustifiable, since the adverbial -Ši, as far as is known, must be attached to an adjective, not a substantive; as for his renderings of ka-da-Ši, bar-Ši, and igi-Ši, they are not more than very dubious conjectures). In line 26, I read -gesi -gi between ki-gub-ba ni and i-im -gi-Ši, ge. In line 28, the reading and meaning of the initial complex are quite uncertain; it might be expected to parallel in some way the ba-Ši in the second half of the line. In line 30, the rendering “he told no one” for ši-na-m-e-ra nu-nu-pa-dug seems reasonable; grammatically, however, one might have expected the Sumerian to read ši-na-m-e-ra nu-nu-pa-dug.  
17. Following i-im -tuš-tuš-k, is probably an erasure, to judge from the photograph.  
18. “Threatened” is a conjecture for gešu -ruš-geš; “house” seems to refer to the Abzu-shrine.  
19. “From the clay” renders im -ašu -a, literally perhaps “in the Abzu-clay,” similarly in the line following ka-Ši-Ši-Ši means literally “in the Abzu-gate.”

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38. Enki kept talking to him at the place of combat.  
39. Brought him along to the place where the turtle stood.  
40. The turtle seized his back with its sinews.  
41. The hero Ninurta turned against its “feet.”  
42. Enki, as one perplexed, says “What now is this!”  
43. He made it scrape the ground with its claws, made it dig an “evil” pit,  
44. He threw the hero Ninurta into it alongside it.  
45. The hero knew not how to ascend [from(?)] ...  
46. The turtle kept on gnawing [at his feet] with its [claws].  
47. The great lord Enki says to him:  
48. “From ... If(?!) have gathered(?!) ...,”  
49. You who have set your face to kill me  
50. [The braggart who makes big claims I lay low, I raise up,  
51. How is it that you have set your face against me!  
52. What has your past acquired for you, what indeed is its ...  
53. Whither has your strength gone! Where is your heroism?  
54. You destroyed mountains -- why is it that now you cannot ascend!”  
55. Ninmenna learned of this matter.  
56. She rips the garment of her body, she ...  
57. “As for my plant-eater -- you, who has carried it (death) off from you?”  
58. The one whose head trembles not, that ... -- you, who has carried it off from you?  
59. Enki, that which has no name, its name being ‘the day that pours not ...’,  
60. Pitiless death -- you, who has carried it off from you?”

20. The rendering and implication of this line are rather uncertain.  
21. The rendering of this line which seems to depict Ninurta’s defensive counterattack, is rather uncertain.  
22. The first complex should probably be restored to read ‘an-ki-[k e].’  
22a. The three dots represent a complex that may have described the pit from which Ninurta could not ascend.  
23. “Kept on gnawing” is a surmise for ba-an-sur-sur.  
24. “To kill me” renders sag-Šis-ra-m u-u-s, literally “for my being killed”.  
25. The meaning of this line is not clear, especially because of the ambiguous ki-gub-ba.  
26. The nuance intended by the -da- of ba-da-an-pa+d is not clear.  
27. The reading and meaning of the fragmentary second half of the line are uncertain; in any case it does not seem to include a verb of saying to introduce the following speech.  
28. For this concluding passage, cf. note 6.
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