

55) The “House of Joy” at Hatra and Babylon’s Esagila — The main sanctuary of Hatra, the monumental city of the Iraqi Jazirah that thrived in the Arsacid period (1st – 3rd cent. AD) and has yielded a substantial Aramaic corpus, was dedicated to Maren “Our Lord”, i.e. the Sun-god Šamš, and named *sg(y)l*-Sagil. This is well known to be the Aramaic rendering of the name of Marduk/Bēl’s temple at Babylon, the Esagila, already attested as *sngl* in an Aramaic epigraph on a cuneiform tablet dated to the 6th year of Alexander (Delaporte 1912 n°99:2)¹. “Sagil” is a clear Babylonian influence in Hatra, often cited as paramount evidence for the prestige of Babylon and the continuity of Babylonian cults beyond the cuneiform tradition.

The Sagil is attested in several Hatran inscriptions, notably H 107, a monumental text on a limestone slab. For its editions, see Healey (2009, 276-277 with literature and photo). The following translation differs slightly from those published so far.

1. [']n' [gdy] br 'b[y]gd [br]
2. gdy br [']bygd br kbyr[w]
3. mn bny rpšmš 'dryt
4. lšmš 'lh' rb' 'bd
5. tbt' byt hdy' 'ly' d[y]
6. sgy l hykl' rb' dy bn'
7. brmryn lšmš 'bwhy 'l
8. hyy w'l hyy mn dy rħym ly k[lh]

“I, [Gadday], son of Ab[ī]-Gad, [son of] Gadday, son of [A]bī-Gad, son of Kabīr[u], of the Bani Rap-Šamš, have helped Šamš, the great god, the benefactor: (in) the elevated House of Joy o[f] Sagil, the great temple, which Barmaren built for his father Šamš. For my life and the life of everyone who loves me.”

Commentary

1: The line is almost entirely damaged and names are reconstructed according to papponymy. As the hand-copy in the *editio princeps* (Safar 1962, 28) bears [...]'n' [...] br 'b[y]gd' [...], the line may have been more readable when the inscription was discovered.

4: For the preposition *l-* as *nota accusativi* see Aggoula (1991, 67); cf. instead “*zugunsten des großen Gottes*” (Beyer 1998, 53) or “for (the honour of) Shamash” (Healey 2009, 276).

5: A preposition of place *b-* may not be expressed in the genitive construction *byt hdy' 'ly' d[y]* “(in) the elevated House of Joy”. See also Beyer’s (1998, 53) reading *byt hry' “das Haus der hohen Adligen (= der Versammlungsraum des Senats?)”* with <ṛ> rather than <d>.

The text was found in Iwan n°4 (numbering according to Andrae 1912 Taf. VII), a comparatively small room in the Sagil itself, and it is likely to commemorate some restoration works in the building, which were sponsored by one Gadday, of the tribal group known as Bani Rap-Šamš. The expression “the great temple, which Barmaren built for his father Šamš” (lines 6-7) implies that the Sagil was built with the financial support of Barmaren’s (i.e. “the Son of Our Lords”) temple community. T

The expression *byt hdy' 'ly' d[y] sgy l* “(in) the elevated House of Joy o[f] Sagil” (lines 5-6) has been repeatedly discussed. Aggoula (1998, 38-39; 66) suggested “*la maison (salle) haute de réjouissance*”, a ceremonial room on an upper floor (“*haute*”); Healey (2009, 277) translated “House of the Joyous” and compared this name to that of Sīn’s temple in Harran, Eḫulḫul (E₂.ḪUL₂.ḪUL₂), Akkadian *Šubat Ḫidāti* “House which gives Joy” (George 1993, 99; Sima 1995-1996, 319). The translation offered here follows *DNWSI* (p. 349, s.v. *hdy₃* with literature). Although the spelling *hdy'* seems to point indeed to the adjective *ḫdāyā* “joyous”, whereas for “House of Joy” one would expect **byt ḫdt'* or **byt ḫdwt'*, a feminine word for “joy” is common in Late Aramaic (Syriac, Jewish Babylonian, Mandaic) but so far unattested in more ancient phases of the language. Moreover, “the Joyous” as a divine epithet or epiclipsis is not attested elsewhere in the Hatran corpus, therefore it seems reasonable to translate *hdy'* as “joy”.

Going back to the Akkadian origin of the expression, Hatra’s proximity to Harran makes it plausible that some Harranian religious concepts could be assimilated by Hatrene culture, as witnessed by the attestation of the Edessene theonym Māralāhē in Sa’dīya, 20 km east of Hatra (Beyer 1998 S 1). However, an alternative explanation for the Hatrene “House of Joy” can be found in Babylon itself rather than far north. The cuneiform series Tintir, which lists the main Mesopotamian holy cities and their sacred buildings, displays in fact E₂.ḪUL₂[...], likely to be restored E₂.ḪUL₂[LA], as the name of a shrine in the Babylonian Esagila (Tintir II:5’; George 1992, 50-51 “Joyful House”; 1993, 99). The correspondence is even more striking if one considers that H 107 was found in Iwan n°4, a room that might have well functioned as a smaller shrine within the larger temple complex. The Hatrene “House of Joy” may thus even have been Iwan n°4. The analogy becomes even clearer if one translates line 5 “in the elevated House of Joy”, with a fully expressed preposition of place (see Commentary above).

Hatra's Sagil has not yielded other texts that can prove that other rooms in the sanctuary bore ceremonial names inspired by the Babylonian Esagila. There is no proof either that the Hatrenes were fully aware of such a connection, as the name "House of Joy" may have been intended as a centuries-old expression or stock phrase. Yet, the abundant Mesopotamian religious heritage discernible in Hatra has been recognized as more distinctively Babylonian than Assyrian (Dirven 2014, 219). In this respect, it may be useful to recall the archetypal value of Babylon's Esagila as a model for several other temples in the 1st millennium BC: Ezida at Borsippa, Ebabbar at Sippar, and perhaps the Neo-Babylonian "double" temple at Tell Ingharra-Ḥursagkamma (George 1999, 74). Such a role lies in the temple's manifold connotation as Marduk/Bēl's dwelling: a place from which the god ruled the universe and where other gods and mankind paid their tribute to him (George 1992, 296-297; 1999, 67-68). Just as Babylon was the place where all gods converged, as celebrated in Enūma eliš (George 1999, 70), the Sagil of Hatra, in the city's huge Temenos, fulfilled an identical function. It has been noted that gods and goddesses attested in the Temenos can appear also in other smaller shrines in the whole city, whereas the contrary does not always happen. Furthermore, Hatra's Temenos was a massive embodiment of the religious and political programme carried on by the city's rulers: it was the focal point of all cults practised in the city and –on a superregional level– the point of convergence of substantial pilgrimages and of a closely-woven net of diplomatic relations with neighbouring political entities. The available evidence is not compelling enough to allow to hypothesize that Hatra's Temenos, and notably its Sagil, was directly inspired by Babylon's Esagila and that Hatra's rulers aimed at mirroring Babylon. Nevertheless, the presence of the "House of Joy" at Hatra constitutes important evidence for the continuity of Babylonian culture and can be added to the list of ancient Mesopotamian features that can be retrieved in this Aramaic-speaking city of the Arsacid period.

Note

1. Tubach (2013, 207 fn. 57) proposed that *sgyl* may be a shortened transcription of Sumerian E₂.SAG.IL₂: the morpheme E₂ would have been still correctly understood and therefore omitted to avoid redundancy. Such a suggestion, though, should be evaluated carefully.

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