

91) Philological Notes on Akkadian *barāmu*, *šapû*, and *šarāpu* — The motivation to write down these reflections arose from my work on the investigations by the first decipherers of Akkadian and the cuneiform writing system in which it was written, and from engagement with recent publications on colours, dyeing, and textile terminologies in the ancient Near East.

1. *barāmu*, *birmu*, *mubarrimu*

Akk. *barāmu*, “to be multicoloured, variegated”; *burrumu*, “to colour, twine in several colours” (CAD B 103); “to make multicoloured; to weave” (CDA 38); *barmu*, “multicoloured”; *birmu*, “trim woven of several colours” (CAD B 257), “multicoloured cloth” (CDA 45); *burrumu*, f. *burrum/ntu*, “multicoloured, speckled” (CDA 49);¹⁾ *mubarrimu*, “worker of coloured textiles; weaver”.

When Edward Hincks prepared a revised translation of the inscriptions on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III for the Trustees of the British Museum in 1854 (MS BL Add.22097, fols 12-20; see Cathcart 2021: 62 n. 1), he had little success in grasping the meaning of the words in Epigraph 4, TÚG *lu-bul-ti bir-me u GADA.MEŠ*, which today can be translated “garments with multicoloured trim, and linen (garments)” (Grayson 1996: RIMA 3, A.0.102.90). He had previously suggested that the words meant “cloth dyed crimson and yellow” (Hincks 1853: 426), but in the translation which he presented to the Trustees of the British Museum, he rendered the text “cloth dyed with *birmi* and *kum*” and gave the following comment in the notes:

The word “dyed” has its meaning determined from the Hebrew, the root being obviously *ʔbl*. That the substance dyed was cloth appears from the sculptures below this epigraph. It is represented on the second side of the obelisk as borne by two men on a pole. Of the two words which follow, and which seem to be dyestuffs, the first *birmi* may be *vermi*, “worm”, corresponding to the Hebrew *tōlaʿ* and to kermes. Or else it may be connected with the Arabic *barama*, which signifies parti-coloured. This, however, seems to be a secondary signification, the root implying primarily twisting together. I am inclined to think that the meaning is crimson, but prefer retaining the Assyrian word (MS BL Add.22097, fol. 20r).

This note is interesting for revealing how Hincks was sometimes led astray. In an earlier publication, he had suggested the reading *ʔibbulti* (for *lubulti*, a word which he had not yet identified), assigning the value *ʔib* to the first sign, and associating the word with Heb. and Aram. *ʔbl*, “to dip, immerse” (Hincks 1852: 361). His assumption that *ʔbl* could mean “to dye” is not supported by evidence. He also failed to recognise that the TÚG sign was a determinative. In the same publication Hincks proposed that *birmu* was the Indo-European equivalent of Heb. *twlʿ*, and it was for this reason that he thought *birmu* meant “crimson”. It is surprising that he did not think of the Bib. Heb. hapax legomenon *brmym*, pl. only, “multicoloured trim (or cloth)”, in Ezek 27:24. When Jules Oppert, Hincks’s correspondent and rival decipherer, came across *lu-bul-ti bir-me* in an inscription of Sargon II, he accepted Hincks’s incorrect reading *ʔibbulti*, but correctly associated Akk. *birmu* with Heb. *brmym*, “ordinairement interprété comme signifiant une étoffe tissue de deux matières différentes” (Oppert & Ménant 1863: 213).²⁾ He pointed out that the Akkadian and Hebrew words could be explained by reference to Ar. *barama* and related nouns. It is remarkable that neither Hincks nor Oppert noted that even before the decipherment of Akkadian Gesenius rendered Heb. *brmym*, “vestes polymitae” (Gesenius 1835: I, 244). The information on the Arabic verb *barama* and related nouns which is given in Gesenius’s Thesaurus philologus and in the multiple editions of his *Hebräisches und chaldäisches Handwörterbuch* is more or less the same as that found in Arabic dictionaries today. See Ar. *barama*, “to twist, twine (a rope)”, and form IV with the same meanings; *barīm*, “rope; string, cord, twine” (Wehr 1971: 55); *mubram*, “a garment, or piece of cloth, of which the thread is twisted of two yarns, or distinct twists” (Lane 195).³⁾

Thavapalan’s study of Akk. *birmu*, “multicoloured trim”, and *barmu*, “multicoloured”, has a lot of interesting detail (Thavapalan 2020: 79-89). On *birmu* she writes (88): “it denotes a fringe or trim that was made by weaving together several dyed wools and was subsequently attached to textiles”; and “naturally pigmented fleece of different hues could be woven together”. She also quotes words from an Old Assyrian letter to support her view that “multicoloured” and “dyed” were not the same thing: TÚG *burrumam u šinītam la tašaʿamanim*, “do not buy multicoloured or dyed cloth for me” (TCL 19 69:21-22; CAD Š/3 47). She thinks *birmu* may designate a more expensive piece of textile, which was manufactured by a specialist known as *išpar birmi*, “the “weaver of multicoloured cloth” (Thavapalan 2020: 88; see CAD I-J 253). For a pertinent example of usage, see the text *išpar birmi išpar kitē ina panīya yānu*, “there is no weaver of multi-coloured cloth with me nor weaver of linen” (CT 22 57:6). (On weaving in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, see Gaspa 2018: 67-92; and on the production of linen, Quillien 2014.) It is remarkable that Thavapalan does not refer to Ar. *barama*, *barīm*, and *mubram*, or Heb. *brmym*, but mentions Ar. *ḥābaru*, “variegated cloth”, and other Arabic (and Ethiopic) words, noting that they are not etymologically related to Akk. *barmu* and *birmu*. Finally, Gaspa has some interesting remarks on the role of the *mubarrimu*:

Various specialized weavers operated in the Assyrian workshops, one of whom was probably the *mubarrimu*. This profession has been connected in some dictionaries [CAD M/2 158; AEAD 66] with the operation of dyeing, but the derivation of the title from the verb *burrumu*, “twine in several colours” makes clear that this craftsman probably fabricated woven textiles from threads or cloth parts of different colours (Gaspa 2018: 77).

In a Neo-Assyrian list of professions, *mubarrimu*, “a weaver, or worker of coloured textiles”, is followed by *mušappiu*, “a dyer” (MSL XII 240) and it is to *šapû* and related terms that we now turn.

2. *šab/pû, šāpiu, mušappiu*

Akk. *šab/pû*, “to soak, drench” (CDA 333); “to bathe, soak (an object)” (CAD S 45-46); *šāpiu*, “dyer”; *šubûtu*, fem. noun, NB, “dyed wool”; “dyeing” (AHw 1108; CAD S 228); *mušappiu*, “dyer” (AHw 678; CAD M/2 241); *šīpu*, “soaking”; “dyeing” of brick, textile (AHw 1104; CAD S 205). The primary meaning of *šab/pû* is “to soak”, but it is used in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods with the meaning “to dye” (Thavapalan 2020: 44, 55).

The *mušappiu* is well attested in Neo-Assyrian texts: for example, ^m*ta-bal-a-a LÚ.mu-šap-pi-ú*, “Tabalayu, dyer” (SAA 12, 65:4); *ina UGU ši-pi [0] [iq-ṭ]ar-bu LÚ.ša-pu-u*, “The dyers have [begun to dye]” (SAA 5/2, 296:2-3). A rare instance of *mušappītu*, “female dyer” has only surfaced in recent decades after a re-examination of the British Museum tablet K 992. The first copy of this tablet was published in 1912 (Waterman 1912: 16-17), but it received little attention until Jas made a new copy of the text, following a suggestion by Karlheinz Deller (Jas 1990). The tablet is a letter about the amount of silver which is required to pay wages to four merchants and their spouses, and to one female dyer. In the most recent edition of the letter, line 10 reads: 1 MÍ.mu.šap-pi-tú 1/2 MA.NA [], “One female dyer: half a mina” (SAA 16, 54:10). Gaspa regards this rare example of *mušappītu* as evidence that women were also involved in dyeing (Gaspa 2018: 62). The importance of the economic role of women in textile production during the first millennium BC is now better understood (Quillien 2016).

Obvious Semitic cognates of Akk. *šab/pû* are (a) Aram. and Syr. *šb*’, “to moisten, dip, dye”; *šb*’, *šb*’ (šēba’, šeb’ā), “colour”; *šb*’, *šb*’ (šabbā’, šabbā’ā), “dyer”; Aram. *šb’ny*n (pl.), “coloured material, garments”; (b) Ar. *šabaġa*, “to dye, stain (e.g. a fabric), colour, tint”; “to dip (something in water)”; *šibġ*, pl. *ašbāġ*, “colour, dye, dyestuff; pigment”, and *šibġah* and *šibāġ*, pl. *’ašbiġah*, with similar meanings (Wehr 1971: 502; Lane 1648; Dozy I, 816). A noteworthy example of the usage of *šb*’ in Official Aramaic occurs in TAD B2.6 R.7, *lḫš l zy ‘mr hdt ḫṭb šb’ ydyn*, “One new woollen garment striped with hand-dyed colour”.⁵⁾

A separate root *šb*’ is attested in the Ugaritic topographical name *ḫr-šb*’, which is also found with the syllabic writing URU *ḫu-ur-šu-<bu>-i* (DUL 402). The name probably means “lair of a hyena” (Astour 1975: 289 no. 45). Heb. *gy ḥšb’ym* in 1 Sam 13:18 may mean “Valley of the Hyenas”. If the Hebrew hapax legomenon *šbw*’ in Jer 12:9 means “hyena”, it must be cognate with Ar. *ḏab*’, *ḏabu*’, pl. *dibā*’, *’adbu*’, “hyena” (Wehr 1971: 535). It may also be related to Eth. *š’b*, “wild animal, especially hyena” (Dilman 1865: 1305, “bestia rapax, in specie hyaena”). Gradwohl (1963: 61) relates it to *šb*’, “to dye, colour”: “eig. die Farbige, farbig Gestreifte”. However, the comparative evidence shows that two different roots, I *šb*’ and II *šb*’ must be distinguished.

3. *šarāpu*

Akk. *šarāpu*, “to burn, fire”; “dye (red)”; G “to smelt and refine” metal; “to fire, bake” clay tablet, brick; “to dye” textiles, ivory, leather, mountain with red (colour), blood etc. D “to burn (up)” drug, person in fire; of stomach “give burning pain”; of cheeks “to burn” with tears; “to dye (red)”; N “to be fired, reddened” (CDA 334; cf. AHw 1083-1084). There is an extensive discussion of *šarāpu* in Thavapalan 2020: 55-63.

The unsatisfactory nature of having two entries, *šarāpu* A, “to refine” metals by fire; “to fire” bricks; “to burn” (intrans), and *šarāpu* B, “to dye red, dye”, in CAD S 102-104, is illustrated further by the note at the end of the entry for *širiptu*, “burn (a disease)”: “While the Sum. equivalents connect *širiptu* with *šarāpu* A, to burn, in the med. ref., *širiptu* may refer to a red spot and be connected with *šarāpu* B, [to dye red, dye]” (CAD S 207). For *širiptu*, “reddening, discolouration of the skin”? see AHw 1105; CDA 339.

In a fragment of an unpublished paper on “Hebrew Roots Compared with Assyrian” (MS: GIO/H 558; Cathcart 1999: 2-4), probably written about 1854, Hincks observed that the verb *šarābu/šarāpu* occurred frequently in Assyrian royal inscriptions. He wrote: “The contexts admit no other meaning than ‘reddden’. It occurs with *mountains*, *villages* and *waters* as its object. The instrument being always expressed by the same ideograph, referred to slaughtered enemies, which can only signify ‘blood’”. He gave two examples from the inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II: ÚŠ.MEŠ-šú-nu KUR-ú *aš-ru-up*, which he rendered “with their blood the mountain I reddened (*ašrub*)”; and *pag-ri*.MEŠ-šú-nu SILA URU-šú-nu *ú-mal-li* ÚŠ.MEŠ-šú-nu É.ḪI.A.MEŠ-šú-nu *aš-ru-up*, for which he gave the translation, “With their corpses the streets of their city I filled; with their blood their clusters of houses I reddened”. Compare the translations by Grayson 1991: RIMA 2, A.0.101.1 ii 114; ii 55-56.⁶⁾ To illustrate the dyeing of water Hincks selected a passage from an inscription of Sargon II: A.MEŠ ÍD.MEŠ-šú *i-na* ÚŠ.MEŠ LÚ.*qu-ra-di-šú iš-ru-pu na-ba-si-iš*, which he rendered “The waters of his rivers with the blood of his soldiers they made red (*išrubu*) as a slaughter house”. The translation “as a slaughter house” for *nabāsīs*, “like red wool”, is a guess. Today *mē nārātīšu* (A.MEŠ ÍD.MEŠ-šú) is translated “the water of his canals” (see Frame 2021: RINAP 2, 7:129).⁷⁾

Hincks compares *šarāpu* (his *šarābu*) with the Bib. Heb. *šrb*, which occurs in the niphal form *nšrbw*, “they shall be scorched” (Ezek 21:3); the related adjective found in Pr 16:27, *k’š šrbt*, “as a scorching fire”; and the noun *šrbt*, “scar”, or, as Hincks suggests, “inflammation (or redness)” (Lev 13:23, 28), which can be compared with Akk. *širiptu* (see above). In Thavapalan’s view, *šarāpu* is the common term for “to dye”: “It alludes to the heat necessary for dying, as the basic meaning of this verb is ‘to heat/scorch’... The association between the verb *šarāpu* and the colour red (e.g. red-dyed wool and leather) derives from the colour of fire” (Thavapalan 2020: 55, and ref. there to AHw 1083 and Landsberger 1967: 146-148). Finally, recent scholarship suggests that it is unnecessary (contra CDA 334) to have separate entries (I and II) for *šāripu*, “dyer”, as in NA, NB *šārip dušē*, “leather dyer”; and *šāripu*, pl. *šāripūtu*, “dyers” (Ugarit).

Notes

1. CAD B 332 adds the comment “The qualification *burrumu* seems to refer to a mixture of two colours”. This interpretation is too narrow.

2. See Frame 2021: RINAP 2, 7:142 (Sargon II). Cohen is unaware of Oppert’s 1863 publication and states that Heb. *brmym* was first compared to Akk. *birnu*, “multicoloured (trim)” by him in 1869 (Cohen 1975: 49, 93 n. 258; Oppert 1869: 601, 609). Oppert’s observation was noted by Edwin Norris in the first Assyrian dictionary to be compiled (Norris 1868: I, 122). Among the marginal annotations in his personal copy of Norris’s dictionary, Rawlinson compared *birnu*, *birme* with Heb. *brmym*, “variegated stuffs” and added: “*birme* is certainly a colour”. Ezek 27:24, *gnzy brmym* probably means “multicoloured carpets”. The technical character of some vocabulary in certain contexts in Ezekiel should not be a cause for surprise (Liverani 1991: 66).

3. All the main Hebrew dictionaries have references to Akk. *birnu* and Ar. *barama* in their entries for *brmym* (BDB 140; HALOT 161-162), but Akk. *birnu* and *burrumu* are more important for elucidating the Hebrew. It is remarkable that Zimmerli in his commentary on Ezek 27:24 says that *brmym* “is to be understood on the basis of Arabic” (Zimmerli 1969: 632 [ET 1983, 51]). His translation “zweifarbige” (“of two colours”), as noted by Cohen (1975: 94 n. 260), reflects a reliance on Ar. *barama* and *barīm*. This has filtered down into HALOT, 162 where *brmym* is rendered “two-coloured fabric”. Zimmerli seems to have been unaware of Akk. *birnu*, or he chose to ignore it. Zorell, on the other hand, explains *brmym* as probably “*panni variegati*”, and mentions Akk. *burrumu*, “variegatus”, and Ar. *barama*, “plura fila in unum contorsit” (Zorell 1948: 131).

4. In his lament over Saul, David tells the women of Israel to weep over Saul “who clothed you in crimson” (*hmlbškn šny*) (2 Sam 1:24). The Aram. Tg. has, “who was putting on you coloured garments” (*lbwšy šb’nyn*). In Tg Ezek 16:10, *lbwšy šb’nyn*, “in colourful garments”, is a translation of Heb. *mšy*, “in rich fabric”, a word of uncertain meaning, but probably an Egyptian loanword. See Eg. *mšy*, a type of (fine?) dress.

5. Rare examples of Bib. Heb. *šb’*, “dyed cloth”, occur in a passage in the Song of Deborah, where *šb’* is found with *rqmh*, “embroidered cloth”, in a context of soldiers’ spoil: Judg 5:30, “spoil of dyed cloths (*šb’ym*) for Sisera, a dyed cloth or two (*šb’ šb’ym*) as spoil, an embroidered cloth or two (*rqmh rqmty*) for my neck as spoil?” See Gradwohl 1963: 1, 61.

6. For similar texts, see Grayson 1991: RIMA 2, A.0.101.1 i 53, UŠ.MEŠ-šú-nu GIM *na-pa-si* KUR-ú *lu aš-ru-up*, “With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool”, and ii 17-18 (Ashurnasirpal II). For the dyeing of steppe and plains “red like the *illūru*-plant”, see Frame 2021: RINAP 2, 65: 135 (Sargon II).

7. For another example of the dyeing of water with the blood of warriors, see Novotny & Jeffers 2018: RINAP 5/1, 9 ii 65-66, UŠ.MEŠ-šú-nu ÍD *ú-la-a-a ú-šar-di* A.MEŠ-šá *aš-ru-up* GIM *na-ba-as-si*, “I made the Ulāya River flow with their blood; I dyed its water red like red-dyed wool”, and 11 iii 42-43 (with *ki-ma* for GIM) (Ashurbanipal).

Abbreviations

MS BL Add. British Library, Additional Manuscripts.

MS GIO/H Griffith Institute, Oxford: Hincks Correspondence and Papers.

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