

83) NB “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*”: “a plot covered with pits”?* – In a group of Neo-Babylonian texts from Borsippa, coming from the family archive of Šaddinnu, son of Balāssu, descendant of Bēliya’u, prepared for publication by J. Paszkowiak-Wojciechowska, there are several contracts concerning the sale of houses and building plots located in the city of Borsippa. Two of these texts (VS IV, 98 and VS V, 79) mention a term otherwise unknown in similar context: “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*”.

The contracts’ formula and careful description of the location of plots being the subject of transaction (by listing owners of the adjacent houses and describing surrounding topographical features), are identical as in the case of contracts concerning houses (*bītu*), ruined houses (*bītu abtu*) and unbuilt plots (*kišubbu*) available for building activities. Consequently, “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” needs to be another kind of plot located in the city.

The comparison of prices of different kinds of urban plots demonstrates that the most expensive are plots with houses, followed by plots containing ruined houses, although in some cases (e.g. BM 25100) the price of a ruined house may be even higher than that of an existing house. Plots “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” and unbuilt plots “*kišubbu*” are the cheapest ones. For instance, in BM 21938 the price of 1 reed of empty plot is one shekel of silver, while in VS IV, 98 the price of “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” is even less than one shekel for a reed. In VS V, 79 the price of a whole “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” plot of unknown area is 20 shekels of silver. There is no doubt that the prices of unbuilt plots and “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” plots were comparable and much lower than those of existing houses. Also the size of “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*” plots corresponded well with that of building ones (cf. H. D. Baker, *The Archive of the Nappāḥu Family*, Wien 2004, 57-59).

It is clear that the word “*bītu*” “house” has to be translated as “plot”, like in other Neo-Babylonian contracts (see CAD s. v. 5). Therefore to understand the discussed term properly it is necessary to interpret its second part, i.e. the word “*ḥiṭṭatu*”. It is evidently a derivate from the root *ḥṭṭ*, which bears the meaning of digging or excavating (compare *ḥaṭāṭu* “to make a ditch, to excavate” and “*ḥiṭṭu*” “pit, ditch”). Accordingly, there are two possible interpretations of the term “*bītu ḥiṭṭatu*”: 1) a plot with a ditch prepared for

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setting foundations of a house, or 2) a plot whose surface is pierced by one or more pits or ditches.

There is no archaeological evidence for setting foundations in trenches for construction of private houses in this period (C. Castel, *Habitat urbain néo-assyrien et néo-babylonien*, Paris 1992, 31-32).

The other explanation seems more probable. A visitor to a present-day Near Eastern village built up with mud-brick houses, may observe a number of shallow pits located in open areas in the vicinity of houses. These pits, sometimes several meters large, but hardly one meter deep, serve as a source of clay necessary for periodical re-plastering of the houses' walls and roofs, needed to keep them water-resistant. Ancient mud-brick houses needed similar care. Indeed, a vast majority of Neo-Babylonian lease contracts of houses include stipulations concerning the repair of walls and roofs of the houses by their users. One may imagine that clay needed for such repairs was dug for in the nearest place available in the vicinity. In the case of houses located in sectors of the city which were not densely built up with houses, any open space adjacent to the houses would have been used as an auxiliary area for domestic activities, for dumping trash and perhaps, as a source of clay, as it may be observed presently. This state of the ground would be a good explanation of the low price of this kind of land.

Although it seems plausible that the term “*bītu ḫiṭṭatu*” could refer to such an area, there are some questionable points which need to be clarified. First of all, the term is scarcely attested in private contracts and, if clay-pits really were such a popular feature of residential districts, one would expect its more frequent occurrences in texts. Secondly, judging by text VS IV, 98, neither the owner of the plot nor the buyer possessed a house adjacent to it, so it can be argued that they would not have had any use for clay-pits distant from their properties. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that small pits could be dug by inhabitants of the neighbouring houses to fulfill their needs, without offence to the property rights. The situation, however, looks differently in the light of text VS V, 79, where both the seller and the buyer have houses adjacent to the “*bītu ḫiṭṭatu*” plot.

The investigation of the archival context can be of assistance here. Though it is difficult to trace the relations between Šaddinnu and the buyer of the “*bītu ḫiṭṭatu*” plot in VS V, 79, the text VS IV, 98 is much more informative. Gūzānu, son of Nabû-mukīn-apli, descendant of Šīgūa, the buyer of the plot, is well attested in Šaddinnu's archive since the 3rd year of Darius, the very same year he bought the “*bītu ḫiṭṭatu*” plot neighbouring Šaddinnu's property on three sides. Gūzānu acted mostly as a witness of Šaddinnu's transactions, and his two sons, Nabû-aha-ittannu and Bēl-ēṭir, were involved in Šaddinnu's activity as well. Bēl-ēṭir was a scribe who wrote down c. 40 tablets belonging to Šaddinnu's archive, but he also quite often acted as a witness, and twice as Šaddinnu's debtor. He even

entered in a business partnership with Nabû-uballit, Šaddinnu's son. Moreover, such close relations between them didn't have any family background, or, as it seems, an official one. It is possible then to surmise that both families were close neighbours. The text VS IV, 98 doesn't indicate the area where the "bītu ḥiṭṭatu" plot was located, yet, the mention of the king's road on the one hand, and the vicinity of Šaddinnu's properties on the other, may suggest that it was sited in the Ishtar Gate district of Borsippa. So, if the supposition that both families lived next to each other is correct, it can be expected that Gūzānu sooner or later built a house on the "bītu ḥiṭṭatu" plot he had bought in VS IV, 98.

Consequently, it is clear that if the "bītu ḥiṭṭatu" plot has been used as a source of easily available clay it was only a temporary use and it could be turned into the building plot at wish. If this was the case, all the pits needed to be filled in to make the plot fit for construction activities and such preparations would have resulted in additional costs. That could explain the low price of the plot. This could also be an explanation of the situation in text VS V, 79: Šaddinnu was interested in buying the plot in spite of facing additional costs because it was adjacent to his house and gave him an opportunity to extend it.

Although the two texts discussed above can be insufficient to dissipate all doubts concerning the proper translation of the term "bītu ḥiṭṭatu", it seems plausible that it should be translated as "pitted plot" or, better, "plot covered with pits".

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