

12) A. A new Neo-Babylonian text concerning the wet nurse¹ – Due to the high death rate of women during childbirth or shortly afterwards, father and family members could find themselves in the position of having to quickly find a substitute to feed the baby with mother’s milk, i.e. a wet nurse. A similar situation arose when people adopted abandoned child, also no rare event in ancient Mesopotamia.²

Neo-Babylonian documents dealing with wet nurses are not common; they belong to two categories of documents – contracts and receipts. The first Neo-Babylonian document concerning a wet nurse, BE 8 47, dated to the 5th year of Nabonidus, was published in 1935 by M. San Nicolò.³ Only a few years ago all documents concerning wet nurses were gathered and discussed by C. Wunsch.⁴ An additional document, VS 6, 79 (8.8.Nbn 9), concerning the issue of barley to different persons, among them to Ninlil-pāni, the wet nurse, could be added to this list.⁵ Another text is BM 72764, dated to the accession year of Xerxes, a receipt for 5 kur of barley, paid to Artim, the wet nurse of Ittahšah, the king’s daughter.⁶ To these one more new document involving wet nurse can now be added.

¹ I am deeply indebted to John McGinnis for his kind comments and for correction of our English style.

² C. Wunsch, “Findelkinder und Adoption in neubabylonischen Quellen,” *Afo* 50 (2003/2004) 174-244; cf. also M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonian and the Bible. Its Mediterranean Setting*, (Cuneiform Monographs 14), Groningen 2000, pp. 181-188.

³ M. San Nicolò, “Parerga Babylonica XV. Zwei seltene neubabylonische Vertragstypen,” *ArOr* 7 (1935) 22-24.

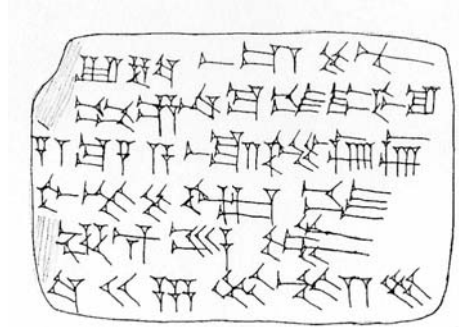
⁴ In “Excurs. Ammenverträge” in Wunsch [Note 1], pp. 211-214 and 237-240 (the texts No 19-21); cf. also the text No 5 (p. 221).

⁵ Mentioned two times, in l. 4 and again in l. 6, this time followed with the title.

⁶ Published by B.T.A. Evetts, *Inscriptions of the Reigns of Evil-Merodach, Neriglissar and Laborosoarchod* (Babylonische Texte VI B, Leipzig 1892), App. 2: 5 KÛR ŠE.BAR šá ^fAr-ti-im mu-še-ni-iq-tu₄ šá ^fIt-ta-aḫ-šá-aḫ²DUMU.MÍ LUGAL šá ŠUⁱⁱ ^mSu-ru-un-du³u ^mšá-pi-i-kal-bi^{lú}GAL.D[Û.MEŠ] ⁴šá ^fAr-ti-im ...

BM 74471 (82-9-18A, 192)⁷

1. [x] GÍN KÙ.BABBAR 1 KÙR ŠE.NU
r^{f1}Qu-un-na-ba-tu₄ DUMU.MÍ-su
šá mBA^{šá}-a ina ŠUⁱⁱ fBu-sa-sa
fmu-še-niq-tu₄
maḥ-rat ITI.SIG₄
U₄.26.KAM MU.2.KÁM
L.e. LÚ.^dAMAR.UTU
LUGAL TIN.TIR.KI



[x] shekels of silver (and) one kur of šunû-seed
Qunnabatu, the daughter of Iqīšā, the wet
nurse has received from the hand of Busasa.

Month Simānu, 26th day, 2nd year of
Amēl-Marduk, king of Babylon (560 BC).



The above translation needs to be commented on because it assumes an important scribal error, i.e. that the word *mušēniqtu* should have been written after the name of the first of two women named in the text. By accepting the text in a way as it was written on the tablet, we would have to invert the position of both women: the wet nurse would be Busasa paying back the silver and seed received earlier from Qunnabatu, the daughter of Iqīšā. Such a situation is possible but highly improbable, because – if such a situation had taken place – it should be explained in the text.

The reading in l. 1 where besides a few shekels of silver the payment for the wet nurse included 1 kur of the šunû plant is doubtful. The šunû plant is well known from many medical texts, where with various herbs it was used for a poultice, for an enema, and for a salve.⁸ It was suggested to identify the šunû with *Vitex agnus-castus*, Syr. šūnāja, the chaste

⁷ The tablet is published with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

⁸ R. Campbell Thompson, *A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany*, London 1949, pp. 296-298 and CAD Š III 309. The šunû appears also in many newly published medical texts, see M. Geller, *Rental and Rectal Disease Texts* (Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin VII), Berlin 2005.

tree.⁹ In the plant list *šunû* (Ú ŠE.NÁ.A) is compared with *ši-lu-ur-tú*,¹⁰ and the second name is recognized as an Assyrian name for the Babylonian name *šunû*.¹¹ Although in the tablet presented here that reading is out of question (the scribe did not try to erase the sign NU and to write any other sign instead of it), the possibility that he made a mistake cannot be excluded, especially in the light of the suggested wrong place for the word *mušēniqtu*. First, in the presently known legal texts, the payments for nurses consist of a few shekels of silver, oil and wool,¹² sometimes also a garment and consumable products, i.e. bread, beer, flour, *salḫu*, salt,¹³ but never the seed of *šunû*. The large amount of seed of *šunû* is also suspicious and it seems highly probable that the scribe wrote wrongly ŠE.NU instead of ŠE.BAR, barley.¹⁴ However, if the writing ŠE.NU is not a mistake, the only possibility would be that a seed added to other products have influence on the health of the wet nurse, maybe on her lactation, i.e. preserved the lactation as long as possible.¹⁵ This was important because contracts with nurses including her obligation to suckle the child were entered usually for three years.¹⁶ However, if the wet nurse received the seed of the *šunû*-plant in order to preserve her lactation, this cannot be either a part of her suckling-fee (*tēniqu*) or a part of her food, as she ate together with the family of the baby. It seems that while the seed was at the wet nurse's disposal, she could prepare an infusion at any time recognized by her as appropriate.

B. Sketch of the Chaste tree

The scientific name of chaste tree *Vitex agnus-castus* was introduced by Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist over 250 years ago and it is still in current use. It is not an

⁹ I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* 3, Wien-Leipzig 1926, p. 491 ff. According to M. Geller (personal communication) such an identification is not certain.

¹⁰ R. Campbell Thompson, *A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany*, p. 247; F. Köcher, *Keilschrifttexte zur assyrisch-babylonischen Drogen- und Pflanzenkunde*, (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Orientforschung), Berlin 1955 12 III 72 ff.

¹¹ CAD Š III, 194 and B. Meissner, ZA 17, 249, n. 2.

¹² See Stol, p. 182 and 186.

¹³ See Wunsch, p. 214.

¹⁴ C. Wunsch suggested me such a possibility. It has sense because although in the Neo-Babylonian texts only one time barley is a part of the suckling-fee paid to wet nurse (Wunsch, p. 214), it appears quite often in Old-Babylonian texts (Stol, p. 186).

¹⁵ Note that such an effect of *šunû* is not known till now, but such influence of chaste tree is known (see below, Part B).

¹⁶ Stol p. 181.

original name, but it has been fixed in the memory because in the European Herbaria (plant collections and botanical books) it has been used since the Renaissance period.

However, the chaste tree has a significantly longer and richer history and therefore requires a wider explanation. This plant had been known already three thousand years ago, which is confirmed both by Greek sources (Theophrastus, Hippocrates) and later by Roman sources (Gallienus, Dioscurides, Pliny).¹⁷ From Pausanias, the Greek traveler, we know that the chaste tree was used in Egypt and in the Near East.¹⁸

The chaste tree is a shrub or low tree, 1-5 m height, densely branched, fragrant. Its palmate leaves consist of 5-7 lanceolate leaflets, whitish-tomentose on the underside and glabrous upper side. Its aromatic, sweet-scented flowers have a variable colour, usually they are lily-like or blue, rarely white. The flowers are gathered into long terminal inflorescences. Its small fruit is dry, after ripening, it disintegrates releasing 4 seeds. Its seeds are aromatic and containing essential oil with a rather sharp aroma (taste), similar to mint oil and eucalyptus oil. The oil has a complex composition (among others, it contains pinene, cineole, sabinene, resins) and this (with others constituents – flavonoids, glycosides, coumarins, steroids, iridoids, vitexinin alkaloid)¹⁹ is probably why it has a wide spectrum of action and application.

Distribution. Chaste tree grows in the whole Mediterranean basin and its natural places of occurrence are streams, gullies and damp localities near the sea.²⁰

Application. Across history, depending on the place and period, changes in the practical application of this plant can be observed. The seeds (agni-casti semen) have been mainly used as raw material, but also its leaves and flowers have been generally used for the same purpose. In the most distant times (except in Greece?!), seeds were used as an essential

¹⁷ Dioscurides *Triumphans*, 2. Teil: Übersetzung und Kommentar (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Dritte Folge, No 173), Göttingen 1988, pp. 161-162; A. Huxley, W. Taylor, *Flowers of Greece and the Aegean*, London 1977, pp. 121-122.

¹⁸ M. Nowiński, *Dzieje upraw i roślin leczniczych*, Warszawa 1980, pp. 261-262.

¹⁹ R. Hegnauer, "Verbenaceae", in: *Chemotaxonomie der Pflanzen* 6 (1973) 658-681; M. Soden-Kriehula, D. Kustrak, N. Blezevic, "Keto-steroids in flowers and leaves of *Vitex agnus-castus*," *Acta Pharmaceutica Yougoslavica* 41 (1991) 237-241; H. Thomas, *Handbuch der Praktischer und Wissenschaftlichen Pharmazie*, Bd. 5, Berlin-Wien 1931; E. W. Wulf, O. F. Maleeva, *The world resources of the useful plants*, Leningrad 1969, p. 362.

²⁰ D. J. Mabberley, *The plant-book. A portable dictionary of the higher plants*, Cambridge 1987, p. 609.

lactogenic agent²¹ in breast suckling (Dioscurides),²² therefore, most probably, it was given to wet nurses of those times.²³ In some ways, contradictory information is supplied by Pliny who wrote that Greek women in order to restrict their sexual desires cushioned their beds with the leaved twigs of chaste tree. This is reflected in Greek mythology where the chaste tree was devoted to Hera, the goddess of marriage and marital faithfulness.²⁴ Another possible interpretation is that chaste tree seeds were used to arouse or to intensify lactation in wet nurses, while leaved (and flowering?) twigs were used to decrease libido. The latter custom obtained a particular importance in Italy in the Middle Ages, where flowers (particularly of white colour) were used to strew the path of cloister novices.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the chaste tree was regarded as an anti-aphrodisiac. This plant was frequently planted in monastic gardens in South Europe and it was commonly used by monks and nuns to remain faithful to their chastity vows. It may be possible that this was also the reason why chaste tree seeds, because of their sharp taste, were used in monasteries as pepper substitute.²⁵

It is interesting to quote the names of chaste tree in different foreign languages: chaste tree, chasteberry, monk's pepper (Engl.);²⁶ agneau chaste, arbre au poivre, gattilier (Fr.); Keuschbaum, Mönchspfeffer, Abrahamsstrauch (Germ.);²⁷ vitex svaschennyi, avramovo dyeryevo (Russ.);²⁸ niepokalanek, pieprz mnichów,²⁹ wierzba włoska³⁰ (Pol.). It is interesting that the national names (except the Russian ones) use a derivative of the epithet referring to "agnus castus", whose literal translation is "chaste lamb" (innocent). The deciphering of the generic name "Vitex" is more difficult. It is known that it was used by

21 S. Foster, Chaste Tree, *Vitex agnus-castus*. www.stevenfoster.com/monograph/vitex.html (2000).

22 A. Huxley, W. Taylor, *Flowers of Greece and the Aegean*, London 1977.

23 H. Thomas, *Handbuch der Praktischer und Wissenschaftlichen Pharmazie*, Bd. 5, Berlin-Wien 1931, p. 1503.

24 C. Rätsch, *Pflanzen der Liebe*, Luzern 1990, pp. 148-151.

25 A. Huxley, W. Taylor, *Flowers of Greece and the Aegean*, London 1977.

26 D. Gledhill, *The Names of Plants*, Cambridge 2002, p. 63, 305.

27 G. Hegi, "Verbenaceae", in: *Illustrierte Flora von Mittel-Europa*, München 1973, pp. 2232-2238; R. Schubert, G. Wagner, *Pflanzennamen und botanische Fachwörter*, Leipzig 1975, p. 58, 372.

28 S.G. Gorshkova, "Verbenaceae Juss.", in: B.K. Schischkin (ed.), *Flora URSS*. Ed. Acad. Scient. 19 (1953), pp. 692-700.

29 J. Rostański, *Słownik polskich imion rodzajów oraz wyszych skupień roślin*, in: *Materiały do Historii i Dialektologii Polskiej* 1 (1900), p. 499.

30 A. Pampuch, *Flora Tremesnensis*, Trzemeszno 1840, p. 42.

Pliny. Maybe, it was created from *Vitilia* (old name of willow) because of its similarity to the lanceolate leaflets of chaste tree.³¹

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³¹ S.G. Gorshkova, "Verbenaceae Juss.", in: B.K. Schischkin (ed.), *Flora URSS*. Ed. Acad. Scient. 19 (1953); A. Pampuch, *Flora Tremesnensis*, Trzemeszno 1840, p. 42.