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Thorns and Roses

ina ešrē bēri edū inās šamma
rāṭa kī aptū ittaḥū unūti
uttā a'ita ša ana ittiša i[ššak]mu anāku luḥḥis
u eleppa ētezib ina kibri

... it twenty leagues distance the tide rocks the flower,
 When I opened the well I lost my tools,
 Something I've found that to me is a sign: it's my fate to renounce it,
 And even the boat I've left on the shore¹.

(Gilg. Nin. XI 297-299)

The following is a comment on Gilg. Nin. XI 266-270 and 287-289. What the 'plant' (*šammu*) was, which Gilgameš plucked at the bottom of the underground canal (*rāṭu*, Hebr. *rāḥāt*, Cant. 7:6) leading to the sweet-water (or water-of-life) ocean on which the earth rests — the 'plant' whose name was *šibu iṣṣaḥer amīlu* 'being old, a man grows young' — that we shall, of course, never know. But at least, how did the poet envisage it? Ut-napišti describes it to Gilgameš as follows:

(269) *siḥilšu kīma amurdinni-ma usa[ḥḥal qātka]*
 'its thorn is like that of an *amurdinnu*, and it will pr[ick your hand],'

and later we learn that the snake, the *nēš qaqqari* (hardly a chamaeleon, who is insectivorous) who ate the 'plant' and thus, changing his skin, at once grew young (287-289), did find it by its odour:

(287) *šēru ētešin nipiš šammi*
 'the snake smelled the breath of the 'plant',

¹ Lit. 'I have found that which [is] s[et] for my sign: even I, I must renounce, also the boat I have left on the shore'.

which surely means that the 'plant' was a flower². No wonder that all commentators, from George Smith to the AHW, have always thought the magic plant was or looked like a rose, with its prickles and its magic odour. The early Assyriologists, being aware, first, of the fact that the Babylonian [-m-] could in the late periods be pronounced as [-w-], and also could represent an original Semitic *w; and second, of the fact that the medieval and modern Near Eastern name for the rose, *ward*, had no satisfactory Arabic, Persian, or Turkic etymology, inferred thar Akkad. **awur-dinnu* or some cognate form of the same root, must be the prototype of Arabic, Persian and Turkic *ward*, and also of Greek *ῥόδον* 'rose'³.

Of course, we know now that the connection between Neo-Babylonian *m* and Old Babylonian and also any non-Akkadian *w* was more complex than that⁴, but very old occurrences of the word *amurdinnu* have so far not been attested, so it still is not impossible that *amurdinnu* goes back to an earlier **awurdinnum*, and it is even obvious that *amurdinnu* would in L Bab be pronounced [awordin]⁵. But is also obvious that *amurdinnu* is a very curious word from the point of view of Semitic word-formation, and AHW marks the word with good ground as L[ehnwort] u[nbekannt] H[er-kunft]. The Akkadians themselves felt the word as foreign, but its origin was not so quite unknown, because *ḡiš-nim-ḡír* = *amurdinnu* is glossed as *ina šu-ba-ri* 'in Hurrian'⁶. And Hurrian it is easily analysed as *am-* root-stem, *-urdā* adjectival denotation of the bearers of different kinds of permanent activities, and *-innə* the very productive Hurro-Urartian adjectival, mostly possessive suffix⁷. Hurr.-Ur.

² It means also that the translation of the NA oracle text Craig ABRT I, 26 r. 1, *amurdinnu ana nipši anappaš* as ('I shall pick the bramble into tufts' CAD A II sub *amurdinnu*) cannot be correct: translate "I shall breathe the (petals of) the *amurdinnu* into the air (lit. 'breath')". Though seldom, Sum. *ú* and Akkadian *šammu* (usually 'non-arboreous plant, herb, drug') may sometimes be translated as 'flower'. Thus *eddetu*, or *eṭtetu*, *ḡiš-ú-ḡír* (see its description below) is apparently 'the tree with prickly flowers': here it is difficult to translate *ú* as 'plant, herb or drug', since it follows *ḡiš* 'tree'.

³ Arab. *ward-* is actually a collective noun 'roses', or else an adjective 'of rose(s)'.
⁴ Cf. my *Языки древней передней Азии*, Москва 1967, pp. 274, 315.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 315-316.

⁶ *ḡiš-geštin-ḡír(-ra/ri-a)* Hh III, 12 sq., Emesal Voc. I, 127; *ú-ḡír-kur-ra* SBH p. 114: 15sq (together with *eddetu* = *ḡiš-ú-ḡír*; *ú-nim-ḡír-ḡír*, *ú-ḡír-kur*: *úmur-din-nu*, *úte-er!-tí-x*: *ú MIN ina šu-ba-ri úmu-ur-din-nu* etc. Uruanna I 595 sq., Köcher, *Pflanzenkunde* 6 VI 20 sq; *úmur-din-nu*: AŠ *šēp anzūzi* 'spider's leg', probably a metaphor for the prickle of the *amurdinnu*, Uruanna III 3.

⁷ I. M. Diakonoff, *Hurrisch und Urartäisch*, München 1971, p. 70 sq. Another sign of its Hurrian origin is the loss of the initial *a-*, not defended by the Semitic glottal stop ' which, although not always written, would usually be present in Akkadian; the Hurrian initial vowel without the glottal stop would be perceived as a zero sound by the Akkadians, cf. Akkad. *allāhinnu*, *lahhīnu* etc. < Hurr. *alla(e) llyinnə* 'person in charge of what belongs to the master's [house]', Armenian *aṭaxin* 'slave-girl, handmaid, house-maid, house help'.

am- means 'to burn', but of course the root may also actually have been **aw-*. The compilers of the CAD, however, argue (s.v. *amurdinnu*) "that the translation 'rose' is based on etymology only", and suggest "bramble or blackberry" instead, which is based on "the historical passages in which it is said to grow wild in the hills⁸ and on its being described as thorny. See also *amaridu*". The reference to *amaridu* probably implies that both words are supposed to be from the same root, which means that *amurdinnu* would not be a borrowed word, because from the point of view of word-formation, *amāridu* is as clearly Arabic, as, to me, *amurdinnu* is Hurrian. The translation of *amāridu* as 'bramble' in the CAD (reference to Uruanna I 175 sq.; Malku II 139 sq.) is based simply on its being mentioned in a list of all sorts of thorny plants (following $\tilde{g}i\check{s}-\acute{u}-\tilde{g}ír$). But actually it should probably be placed with Arab. 'amrad- 'leafless' though the plural in literary New Arabic is, of course, *murd-* and not *amārid-* which, however, seems historically to be an earlier type of *pluralis fractus*. The term may therefore have been applied to any leafless plant, or to one that drops its leaves. *Amāridu* might thus be identified with the box-thorn, or matrimony vine, *Lycium ruthenicum*, a nearly leafless plant 30 cm to 2 m high with big awl-like prickles, with flowers on both sides of the prickles, and poisonous berries. Now the CAD identifies the preceding plant name, $\tilde{g}i\check{s}-\acute{u}-\tilde{g}ír$, *eṭṭetu*, or *eddetu*, with the box-thorn; its Sumerian name means probably 'tree of prickly flowers' which is a good description of the *Lycium*. If it is not simply a synonym of *eddetu*, then another conceivable identification for *amāridu* might be with the alhagi, *Alhagi persarum*, which also has few or no leaves. Akkad. *eddetu*, or *eṭṭetu* is usually connected by the philologists with Arab 'aṭad- Hebr. Mishn. 'āṭād Aram. (*h*)aṭ(t)əṭā, 'aṭədā, which has been identified with a very common plant of the dry steppe zone, Christ's thorn, *Paliurus spina Christi* (*Rhamnus paliurus*), a high branching bush with sharp prickles under the small leaves. It grows on dry hillsides, forming impassable thickets. However, Sum. $\tilde{g}i\check{s}-\acute{u}-\tilde{g}ír$, if correctly translated as 'tree with thorny flowers' would fairly certainly be the box-thorn, as suggested by the CAD — unless it is a common name for any thorny steppe plant. I should like to

⁸ The reference is to VAS 12 193 : 30 (*šar tamḫāri*), and to Aššurbānapli's Arabian campaign Streck Asb. 70 VIII 85; ib. 204 VI 4–8. The context is curious; the author of the text seems to describe not only the march through the arid Arabian desert (*qereb madbar* etc.), but the entire route of the army, beginning well to the west of the Tigris (its 'flood', *mīlu*, is mentioned), and it is here that the bramble, GEŠTIN.GÍR, belongs: *ēṭeli ḫuršāni ša[qūti] iḫtalup* GĪŠTIR *ša šulūšsina rapšu birit* GĪŠ^{MES} *rabūti giššu* GEŠTIN.GÍR^{MES} *ḫarrānu eddetu ēṭetiḳ* 'I ascended high wooded hills; a forest grew (there), so that their shade was broad; I passed between big trees, thorns and brambles (along) a road of box-thorn'. The shady forest and the high trees can hardly belong to Inner Arabia, even if one makes allowances for possible climatic changes. The thorns, the GEŠTIN.GÍR, and the box-thorn belong to the zone between forest and desert, to the description of which the author passes in the next lines. The Iraqi *Rosa canina* does not grow in the lower steppe zone.

note that I do not think anybody ever identified the *amurdinnu* with the domestic rose; only the wild rose, *Rosa canina* L., can be considered in connection with the *amurdinnu*.

Thus, the traditional equation is *amurdinnu* = 'wild rose', Polish: *glóg*, *Rosa canina* L.; the new equation, sponsored by the CAD, is *amurdinnu* = 'blackberry, bramble', Polish: *jeżyna*, *Rubus sanctus* L. Let us now turn to the features of the *amurdinnu* as mentioned in the texts, in order to find such as are specific either of the rose or of the bramble.

Distribution: *The Flora of Iraq* (vol. II, ed. C. C. Townsend and E. Guest, Baghdad 1966, pp. 120-122) tells us that the *Rubus sanctus* grows in "damp shady places by springs and mountain streams, in rocky clefts under cliffs and on the plain in riverain thickets, also in hedges and along ditches, in orchards and gardens, up to the altitude 1500 m", mainly in the forest zone, although it is also found in the upper and lower plains. Attested from the Rowanduz Gorge to Kerbela, e.g. at Amadiya, Niniveh *et al.*, but also in the vicinities of Ba'quba and Baghdad.

The *Rosa canina*, usually the var. *dumetorum* (Thuill.) Desv. (Lat. *dumetum* 'prickly thicket') grows on "hillsides and in valleys by springs or streams, sometimes on rocks, also in hedges" —, on hillsides in degraded oak forests, occasionally in the thorn cushion zone⁹. Altitude 600 to 2900 m. Found from the Rowanduz Gorge and southwards, e.g. at Awroman etc. Thus, it grows in more or less the same general region as the bramble but does not descend into the lower steppes, and its *habitat* is not so much limited to damp and shady riverin thickets and the deeper valleys.

The origin of the term *amurdinnu* being Hurrian both on the evidence of the morphological analysis and of the gloss in Uruanna, one would be inclined to look for the plant in the original home of the Hurrians; a plant growing in the vicinities of Baghdad and Kerbela would not be likely to be called by a Hurrian name, unless there was some confusion between functionally or outwardly similar plants. As to the Assyrian troupes of Aššurbānapli, they, on the one hand, could hardly march through wild rose thickets on their route from the forest to the desert zone, unless in the immediate outskirts of the oak woods; on the other hand, they would, as far as possible, march through the open country, not descending into the deep valleys and riverain thickets, and therefore would not meet much bramble, either on their way through the lower plains. Probably the mention of GEŠTIN.GÍR is here merely, a *topos*¹⁰.

⁹ *Flora of Iraq*, vol. I, ed. E. Guest, p. 17, vol. II, pp. 148-149.

¹⁰ NB on the original home of the Hurrians: Hurr. *hurri* means 'east', and the immediate point of departure of the Hurrian migration to Northern Mesopotamia should be sought in the highlands of the Eastern Taurus and Northern Zagros region; cf. *Hurrisch und Urartäisch*, pp. 5-6. 165, 170; Or. 41, 1, 1972, p. 118.

Flowers and smell. The *amurdinnu*, as we know, had a strong smell which is typical of the rose and not of the bramble. The *amurdinnu* could be burnt as an aromatic, for fumigation (CAD s.v. *amurdinnu*, [b]). The flowers of the bramble are smaller and in no way remarkable by their smell or otherwise.

Edibility. There is no mention in the texts of the *amurdinnu* being edible. The bramble, as is well known, is eminently edible. The Iraqi species is, according to the *Flora of Iraq* II, p. 120 "edible but small and less palatable than the European blackberry *Rubus caesius*". Nevertheless, it is the berry which is the conspicuous part of the bramble plant, and in modern Iraq it is regarded as a sort of mulberry (Pol. *morwa*, Russ. *mym*, Arab. توت العليق).

Medical use. The *Flora of Iraq* does not mention any medicinal use of the *Rosa canina*, except for making vitamin C which was unknown to the Babylonians. As to the *Rubus sanctus*, the tonic and astringent capacity of its leaves are mentioned, as well as the fact that the Malays are said to use another species of the blackberry against dysentery *Flora of Iraq* II, p. 120. The branches (PA) and the leaves *hašhallatu* of the *amurdinnu* are in a Babylonian text actually mentioned as being medicine against an ailment called *himit šēti* 'fever of the *šētu*'. Now the symptoms of the *šētu* illness are, according to the quotations s.v. in CAD S, headache, burning in the eyes with ensuing blindness, colics in the stomach, dryness in the mouth and inability to urinate¹¹. This has nothing to do with dysentery; any experienced physician will without a moment of hesitation identify the complex of symptoms as acute uraemia. Here no astringent and tonic virtues of the bramble would help; in antiquity, any medicine used in such a case, had to be a *placebo*, therefore the use of the *amurdinnu* against the *šētu* does not favour either the rose or the blackberry. One of the texts mentions the exposure to the sun as a cause of the *himit šēti*, which might point to a difference between *šētu* 'uraemia' and *himit šēti*, say, 'sunstroke'; but this hypothesis does not help, because one cannot see how a tonic and astringent would be an aid against sunstroke. Here it is time to call attention to the fact that the sole Akkadian term *amurdinnu* stands for two or even three Sumerian terms. One may wonder whether the Sumerian ideograms in question were really the Sumerian folk plant names, or whether they rather were learned terms —, more descriptive of the object than denotative. For the average Babylonian, there would not be much functional difference between the two prickly bushes of the hills, and the foreign term *amurdinnu*, once having been adopted by the literary idiom, would supplant the native and local names for the Southern Mesopotamian bramble —, names that may probably have existed formerly. Of the Sumerian terms, one, the 'prickly wooden (or 'tree-') vine of the mountains', *ḡi š - ḡe š ti n - k u r -*

¹¹ The symptoms mentioned (CAD S s.v. *šētu* p. 153) are 'a burning sensation inside', 'the stomach is feverish', 'the chest gives a gnawing pain', 'a man's eyes burn', his 'eyes cannot see', the 'skin eats him' (itches), 'a man cannot spit out', 'is sick with internal constriction' his 'intestines are taken with colic, he cannot urinate when he eats bread and drinks beer'. Headache is also mentioned.

ra, is a very fitting description of the bramble, or blackberry, with the prickle like 'spider's legs'¹², but the other terms, namely, 'the prickly plant (= flower?) of the mountains', ú - ģír - kur - (ra), and the 'highland (if this is the translation of nim) very prickly plant (= flower?)', ú - nim - ģír - ģír, may well describe the rose, whose bushes are smaller than those of the bramble, and whose important part are the flowers, hence ú, which, as we think, among other non-arboreal botanical items, also denotes 'flower'.

On the strength of the entire evidence I should vote for the rose, *Rosa canina*, as the original *amurdinnu*. And as a rose I bring the disputed plant to Professor R a n o s z e k. It may be a thorny gift, but such is a long life under the petals of all flowers, whatever their ancient or modern names.

¹² Cf. *Flora of Iraq*, vol. II, ill. on p. 121.