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kurāru 'lumpy lesions'[1]

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Introduction

The nature of the *kurāru*-disease has long been the subject of discussion and uncertainty. While it is clearly some sort of contagious skin lesion, modern editors are more or less evenly split between two different translations: ringworm (*Dermatophytosis*)[2] or a kind of lump.[3] The present paper will offer a few observations which favour the latter understanding.

It should be stated in advance that we do not propose to investigate every attestation of *kurāru* in detail – in particular the medical attestations have been studied in detail recently[4] and so are not investigated here. Rather, the intent is to try to better capture the nature of the skin lesion *kurāru*. There is, of course, still much more research to be done, not least on the related terms *kurartu, kuraštu* or *gurartu, garaštu, guraštu, gurištu,* and *kullarum*, but this is beyond the scope of the present offering.

Etymology

The etymology of the word *kurāru* is unfortunately not particularly helpful in identifying the nature of the disease, as it can be used to argue for either interpretation. In neither case does it carry much weight.

The translation 'ringworm' was first suggested by Campbell Thompson,[5] chiefly on the basis of supposed cognates in Hebrew and Arabic, and of the supposed Akkadian etymology of the word *kurāru.* Similar arguments have been advanced by Scurlock and Andersen.[6] Both derive *kurāru* from a verb meaning 'to turn, roll over; to go round', understanding the underlying idea to be that ringworm forms characteristic circles on the skin.[7] Scurlock and Andersen further suggest that this perhaps explains the occasional use of gold rings in treatments.[8]

There are a number of difficulties with this argument. In the first place, the etymology of *kurāru* is not entirely straightforward, as the first consonant could derive from /G/, /K/, or /Q/,[9] a difficulty that is compounded by disagreement between the dictionaries. The CAD understands three distinct lemmata: *garāru* A 'to turn over, roll over, writhe, coil', *garāru* B 'to shy away,

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[2] E.g. Campbell Thompson 1949 (*DAB*): 148; Adamson 1981 (JRAS 113): 125-126; Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233-234; Wasserman 2007 (CM 36): 59-60. Earlier, Campbell Thompson (1924 (PRSM 17): 10, n.1; 1936 (*DACG*): 11-12) read 'itch', but he disavowed this translation in his later work.

[3] E.g. CAD K: 556b, *s.v. kurāru* 'carbuncle, lesion'; AHw: 510, *s.v. k/gurāru* 'Bez. eines Karbunkels?'; Fincke 2000 (*Augenleiden*): 222 'sty' & 2009 (CM 37): 80 '*chalazion*'; Böck 2003 (AuOr 21): 183-184 'Karbunkeln'; Bácskay and Simkó 2017 (JMC 30): 57 'boil'.

The earliest suggestion of a lump seems to have been made by Campbell Thompson (1926 (PRSM 19): 33 n.1), who suggests that g i g . g i r 'might be "wen" or "pustule"', presumably on the grounds that it can be found on the eyelid. He was apparently not aware that g i g . g i r / p e š was a logographic spelling of *kurāru* (see below), which he translates 'itch' elsewhere in the same paper 1926 (PRSM 19): 71, n. 2).

[4] Böck 2003 (AuOr 21): 161-184

[5] Campbell Thompson 1949 (*DAB*): 148.

[6] Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233.

[7] See Figure 1 below

[8] Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233.

[9] Wasserman 2007 (CM 36): 60.

become scared, to be in a panic', and *qarāru* 'to overflow'.[10] The AHw considers these to belong to a single lemma *q/garāru*(*m*) with the basic meaning 'sich krümmen, schlängeln'.[11] The SAD follows the AHw in reading a single word *qarāru/garāru* 'to turn over; to writhe, grovel; to be(come) frightened; to flow, to overflow'.[12] All three dictionaries concur in reading *karāru* 'to set, place' as a separate lemma.[13]

It is not at all certain to which of these lemmata the *kurāru*-disease is related, but, as Wasserman has pointed out, 'the temptation of etymological acrobatics'[14] is best avoided. Even if the cognate verb could be definitely identified, none of the established meanings of the verbs particularly clearly denote the circular shape of a ringworm infection. Furthermore, if roundness is the basic meaning from which the word *kurāru* is derived, while it might slightly favour an understanding ringworm, it would not be diagnostic – many lesions, including many lumpy ones such as warts and boils, are equally round, though this is not generally taken as their primary characteristic.

A similarly uncertain etymological suggestion concerns the possible cognate *karru* 'knob, pommel'.[15] Again, there is no guarantee that *kurāru* and *karru* share a derivation,[16] though it must be noted that if the link is accepted, it is at least relatively unambiguous in leading us to a translation 'lump'.

Sumerogram

The meaning of the Sumerian logogram with which the word is written does not seem to have been discussed, but is equally difficult. Modern editors are more or less evenly split in their reading of the logogram as either peš.gig / gig.peš or gir.gig / gig.gir. Either reading is possible, as peš and gir are simply two different readings of the same sign (𒄊), but only the former gives a reasonable Sumerian reading, something along the lines of 'thick disease', conceivably a reference to lumps, but difficult to connect to ringworm. If instead we take the latter reading, we should perhaps understand gir to be a phonetic complement pointing to the Akkadian word, i.e. the '*gir*(*aru*)-disease', which naturally offers no assistance whatsoever in understanding the disease itself.

Etymological arguments, then, are not especially helpful – they are an unfortunate combination of ambiguous and uncertain. This is important, however, as such arguments are the chief grounds on which ringworm has been suggested as a reading.

Non-medical attestations

The *kurāru* disease is well attested in medical texts,[17] but only three non-medical contexts have been suggested for the word. Of these, two should be ruled out.

The first is found in an entry in the lexical list Ura = *ḫubullu* III:[18]

III 307	giš-gišimmar gig-ḫab-ba	=	*is-ku-ra-ru*, var. *as-qu-la-lu*
	Bitter date palm	=	*iskurāru / asqulālu*

[10] CAD G: 47-48, *s.v. garāru* A & 49 *s.v. garāru* B; CAD Q: 127-128 *s.v. qarāru.*
[11] AHw: 902, *s.v. q/garāru*(*m*).
[12] SAD G, K, Q: 126, *s.v. qarāru.*
[13] CAD K: 207-209 *s.v. karāru* A; AHw: 447, *s.v. karāru* I; SAD G, K, Q: 58, *s.v. karāru.*
[14] Wasserman 2007 (CM 36): 60.
[15] Durand 1983 (ARM 21): 376.
[16] As already noted by Wasserman (2007 (CM 36): 60).
[17] As mentioned above, we will not analyse the medical attestations of *kurāru* here as this has already been done at length, most recently by Böck (2003 (AuOr 21): 161-184), which discusses all then known references to the disease. To this can now be added an Old Babylonian attestation in a tablet from the Schøyen collection, MS 3277 (George 2016 (CUSAS 32): no. 73).
[18] Landsberger 1957 (MSL 5): 118, l. 307.

The readings *is-ku-ra-ru* and *as-qu-la-lu* each occur on just a single manuscript.[19] Although tentatively associated with *kurāru* in the CAD, reading *iṣ kurāru* '*kurāru*-tree',[20] the phonetically similar variant *asqulālu* suggests instead a phonetically written hapax *iskurāru/asqulālu*, presumably a loanword from a foreign language, the name of a particular kind of tree.

In two administrative texts from Mari, a cloth object called *kurāru* is found in association with weaponry. Durand initially suggested that this was to be understood as a figurative use of the *kurāru* disease,[21] but in a later discussion he retracts the suggestion.[22] In the SAD, the word is taken as a variant form of *karru* 'knob, pommel' and speculatively translated as both 'handles(?)' and 'tassels(?)'.[23] Whether or not the various suggestions concerning this word are accepted, it is of no particular use for present purposes.

The remaining attestation is a line from the incantation series *Lamaštu*:[24]

II 100 *ummarī baḫrūti ša ina gurāri bašlū* *baḫrūti* soup cooked on *gurāru*

The word *gurāru* – a hapax in this context – has been translated in a variety of ways in this line: 'embers',[25] 'glühende Asche',[26] 'Feuer',[27] 'hoher Hitze?',[28] and 'some sort of (heated) ring of stones or pottery cylinder'.[29] The basic point seems to have been missed in these translations. The line quoted is the last one in a brief speech from Enlil, describing what Wiggermann has termed a 'mock cult'[30] for Lamaštu:[31]

II 97 *ša kurbannī līpušū bītki* "may they build a temple for you from clods,
II 98 *lībil*(*l*)*akki kallatu ṣeḫirtu* may an underage bride (?) bring you
II 99 *mulṭâ šebirta pilaqqa šebra* a broken comb, a broken spindle (and)
II 100 *ummārī baḫruti ša ina gurārī bašlū* *baḫrūti* soup cooked on *gurāru*"

Evidently the idea is that Lamaštu is to be given perversions of proper offerings – a house made of clods, rather than bricks, and a broken comb and distaff, brought, perhaps, by someone too young to be making a real offering.[32] The soup should plainly be similarly distorted. We suggest reading 'tepid soup cooked on cinders' instead of Farber's reading 'hot broth cooked on embers'[33]. This hinges on the understanding of *baḫrūti* as 'tepid', which differs from the understanding of the word found elsewhere: AHw reads 'gar; Gargekochtes',[34] while the CAD reads 'hot (said of liquids), as hot as can be tolerated'.[35]

[19] Landsberger 1957 (MSL 5): 118. A third manuscript, BM 33886 (now BM 33452+), is broken after the first sign of the word, reading *as-*ˀxˀ-[…].x
[20] CAD K: 556b, *s.v. kurāru.*
[21] Durand 1983 (ARM 21): 376.
[22] Durand 2009 (ARM 30): 53-54.
[23] SAD G, K, Q: 60, *s.v. karru* II.
[24] After Farber 2014 (MC 17): 172-173. CAD B: 28-29 *s.v. baḫru*
[25] CAD K: 556b, *s.v. kurāru*; Farber 2014 (MC 17): 173;
[26] AHw: 510, *s.v. k/gurāru.*
[27] Myhrman 1902 (ZA 16): 177, l. 41.
[28] Köcher 1949 (PhD thesis): 109.
[29] Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233. This reading is based on a supposed etymology from *garāru* 'to turn, roll over', but the step from this to a ring of stones is not clear to me.
[30] Wiggermann 2000 (CM 14): 240.
[31] Translation after Farber 2014 (MC 17): 173.
[32] See Farber 2014 (MC 17): 240 for a discussion of the otherwise unattested phrase *kallatu ṣeḫirtu*, which he translates 'young bride-to-be'.
[33] Farber 2014 (MC 17): 173
[34] AHw: 96, *s.v. baḫru.*
[35] CAD B: 28-29 *s.v. baḫru.* Earlier suggestions include Myhrman 1902 (ZA 16): 177 '*baḫru*-Früchten'; Meissner 1903 (ZA 17): 'Räuchergefässe'; Köcher 1949 (PhD thesis): 83 'geborstene'. Note that these all understand *ummarī* to mean 'jar' rather than 'soup'

The word is used almost exclusively in medical recipes, principally relating to enemas, the only non-medical uses of the word being found in Lamaštu incantations and rituals.[36] A fully cooked enema seems very unlikely, and an extremely hot enema would presumably risk severe injury. As already noted by Labat and Tournay, *baḫru* denotes 'une température plus proche sans doute de tiède que de bouillante'.[37]

In the light of this reading, we should understand *gurāru* to mean a sort of heat source that would warm soup, but only ineffectually. Embers are a very good heat source, being more or less as hot as fire, but without the flames. Instead, we suggest understanding 'cinders' or perhaps 'clinker' – that is, small, lumpen, relatively cool remnants of a fire after the majority of the heat has been dispersed. Assuming we accept that *gurāru* 'cinders' is connected to the *kurāru*-disease, it should be seen as favouring a translation 'lump' – the small, burnt lumps of wood being thought of as akin to the little lumps of the disease.

Nature of the disease

Several scholars have given a description of the characteristics of *kurāru*-disease.[38] Briefly, the major points can be summarised as follows:

1. It causes skin lesions
2. It is contagious[39]
3. It affects, at least, the head, face, eyelids, fingers, body, and legs, and so, presumably, skin in general[40]

Two points are worth making. First, Böck has suggested, based on its treatment by means of three medications elsewhere used to treat fevers, that *kurāru*-disease may have involved a fever.[41] This does not seem especially convincing – there is no good reason to suspect that materia medica were used only for a single symptom,[42] and no sign in the preserved sources that fever was an element of the disease.

Second, Adamson's argument that *kurāru* is found just on the head can no longer be maintained.[43] Particularly important is the fact that it occurs on the fingers. Ringworm (*Tinea*) can occur on the finger, and indeed almost anywhere on the body – ringworm, athlete's foot, jock itch, and a host of other such infections are, medically speaking, simply the same condition in a different place. Ringworm of the finger (*Tinea manuum*) is, for all intents and purposes, the same as athlete's foot (*Tinea pedis*). The main argument advanced in favour of understanding *kurāru* to be ringworm is the clear circular infection that ringworm causes on the body (*Tinea corporis*), reflected in an Akkadian etymology derived from 'roundness'.[44] In

[36] CAD B: 29a *s.v. baḫru.* It is noteworthy that both *bahrūti* and *gurāru* are otherwise only attested in medical contexts. Probably this was suggestive to Akkadian ears: 'enema-heat soup cooked over lumpy lesions' is an unappetising meal fit for a demoness.

[37] Labat and Tournay 1946 (RA 40): 119.

[38] E.g. Adamson 1981 (JRAS 113): 125-126; Böck 2003 (AuOr 21): 183-184; Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233-234; Wasserman 2007 (CM 36): 59-60.

[39] Wasserman 2007 (CM 36): 59-60.

[40] The majority of these locations are found in the second Tablet of the physiognomic omen series *šumma liptu* 'If a *liptu*-spot'. This Tablet bears the incipit *šumma kurāru* 'If *kurāru*-disease', and details the ominous effects of a *kurāru* lesion on various parts of the body (Böck 2000 (AfO Beiheft): 179-183).

[41] Böck 2003 (AuOr 21): 183.

[42] Although Böck seems to be arguing that the overlap between the three medications is fever, it is worth noting that at least one of them, *mirišmara*-plant, is used to treat conditions other than fever, viz. toothache (CAD M/2: 107b, *s.v. mirišmara*).

[43] Although the majority of attestations concern *kurāru* affecting the head, this seems almost certain to be an accident of preservation. The Tablet *šumma kurāru* 'If *kurāru*-disease' is unfortunately poorly preserved, and so some areas affected by *kurāru* attested elsewhere are not found here. That *kurāru* affects the legs can be seen in a commentary to this Tablet (Böck 2000 (AfO Beiheft): 264, l. 10); that it affects the fingers is seen in an Old Babylonian medical tablet (George 2016 (CUSAS 32): No. 73; Bácskay and Simkó 2017 (JMC 30): 43, n. 140).

[44] Campbell Thompson 1949 (*DAB*): 148; Scurlock and Andersen 2005 (*Diagnoses*): 233.

infections of the finger, however, the circles are not nearly as distinct, if they are discernible at all,[45] and so the fact that *kurāru* is found on the fingers is a strong argument against the identification.

In fact, we should probably go further. Although modern medicine groups these conditions together on the basis that they share an underlying cause, it is far from certain that Mesopotamians, unaware of the fungal nature of the infection, would have considered the relatively dissimilar looking types of ringworm found in different parts of the body to be the same disease. Contagious lumpy lesions (e.g. boils, carbuncles, and warts), on the other hand, appear more or less the same whether on the finger or the head (or anywhere else), and so are much more likely to have been considered the same condition.

Conclusion

Taken together, the arguments here strongly suggest that the reading 'ringworm' should be abandoned. The etymological case underpinning the suggestion is flimsy at best, and even if accepted does not particularly make a reading 'ringworm' more likely than a reading 'lump'. More fundamentally, it is unlikely that ancient scholars would have recognised a ringworm infection of the hand as being identical with one of the body or head. Scurlock's suggestion of a ring of heated stones notwithstanding,[46] it is very difficult to see any way in which ringworm and smouldering cinders could be brought together.

A reading 'lump', on the other hand, is more or less supported by the evidence. Etymological evidence, though still not particularly strong, at least favours an understanding of something *karru* 'knob'-shaped. The Lamaštu reference to cinders could plausibly be associated with small lumps, and, unlike ringworm, little lumpy lesions on the finger, the eye, the head, or the body, appear very similar.[47]

The translation 'lump' is perhaps a little unsatisfactory from a modern point of view. Unfortunately, other possible translations (e.g. papule, pustule, nodule, boil, wen, stye, carbuncle, and wart)[48] all have very precise and specific definitions, and it is both impossible to identify *kurāru* so closely, and unlikely that the ancient taxonomic system matched the modern one.[49] The term *kurāru* very probably covered several conditions now recognised as separate and distinct, but the general principle is likely a notably lumpy, contagious skin lesion, a definition which does not include ringworm.[50]

[45] See Figure 2 below.

[46] See above, note 29.

[47] We have not mentioned the cognate *guraštu*-disease in the present paper because we have no new arguments favouring any particular understanding of the word, except insofar as our understanding of *kurāru* as 'lump' implies a similar identification – perhaps a different kind, size, or shape of lumpy lesion. For a recent study of *guraštu* see Fincke 2011 (WOO 6): 181-184, which concludes that the evidence is too sparse to make a clear identification.

[48] Note that blisters cannot have been included within *kurāru* as the disease is contagious, which is not true of blisters.

[49] This is a general principle in approaching foreign taxonomies of any kind – diseases, animals, plants, colours &c. – the boundaries between what two unrelated taxonomic systems understand to be wholly separate entities need not be the same, and one for one identifications are often impossible. On Mesopotamian medical taxonomy in particular, see e.g. Couto-Ferreira 2020 (Disturbing Disorders): 262-263.

[50] Adamson 1981 (JRAS 113): 125-126.

Figure 1

Figure 1- Photograph of a ringworm infection on the leg
By James Heilman, MD - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19051050

Figure 2

Figure 2 - Photograph of a hand infected with ringworm.
By Mohammad 2018 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68044290

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