

PASKUWATTI'S RITUAL:
REMEDY FOR IMPOTENCE OR
ANTIDOTE TO HOMOSEXUALITY?

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Abstract

The Hittite composition known as Paskuwatti's Ritual (CTH 406) has long been understood as a rite designed to help a man to overcome sexual impotence. The present paper, in contrast, attempts to demonstrate that it is more convincingly interpreted as an antidote to homosexual behavior, apparently seeking to cure its patient of his proclivity for passive sexual acquiescence and to replace it with an inclination toward normative male, i.e. penetrative behavior.

Keywords: cuneiform, Hittite, ritual, homosexuality, impotence, Paskuwatti

Paskuwatti's Ritual (CTH 406), one of dozens of Hittite language ritual prescriptions from the cuneiform archives of Ḫattusa,¹ the capital of the ancient Hittite empire, has long been understood as a ritual designed to help a man to overcome sexual impotence. Goetze (1950) labeled the composition a "Ritual against Impotence" for his translation, while Laroche (1971: 72) similarly referred to it in his catalogue as "contre l'impuissance sexuelle". Also Hoffner (1987), who provided the first proper edition with full commentary, finally placing the text upon a solid philological basis, dubbed it a "ritual against sexual impotence".² His edition serves as the basis for the present discussion. Similarly, Moyer (1983: 27) describes it as a ritual to be enacted "when

¹ For current translations of a variety of Hittite ritual texts, see Kümmel (1987), Collins (1997), García Trabazo (2002), Miller (2008); for an online *Konkordanz* of the ritual texts from Ḫattusa, see <http://www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de/hetkonk/> under CTH, Nos. 390-500. B.J. Collins is currently preparing a comprehensive volume of Hittite ritual texts for the Writings from the Ancient World series of the Society of Biblical Literature.

² Similarly, e.g. García Trabazo (2002) 447-449; Peter (2004: 197); Mouton (2007: 129); Hutter (2003: 237).

a man is sterile or possesses no desire for women”, comparing it to the similar rites and incantations found in KBo 2.9+ i 25-30 (CTH 716; Ritual and Prayer to Ištar of Nineveh), which he, not entirely without reason, suggests “is designed to destroy the masculinity and military capability of the enemy troops” (ibid. 28).³

The present considerations, in contrast, aim to show that the composition is more convincingly interpreted as an antidote to homosexual behavior,⁴ apparently seeking to cure its patient of his proclivity for passive sexual acquiescence and to replace it with an inclination toward normative male behavior, i.e. penetrative behavior, without excluding the aspect, noted by Moyer among others, of restoring the patient’s supposedly inadequate masculinity and eradicating his perceived femininity.⁵

The most suggestive passage from Paskuwatti’s Ritual in this regard is from §4. The ritualist places the feminine symbols spindle and distaff in the patient’s hand, he walks under a gate she has constructed of reeds, the ritualist takes the spindle and distaff away from him, giving him the masculine symbols bow and arrow, whereupon she says

³ He translates the passage, following Hoffner (1966: 331), “Take from (their) men masculinity, prowess, robust health, swords(?), battle-axes, bows, arrows, and dagger(s)! And bring them to Hatti! Place in their hands the spindle and mirror of a woman! Dress them as women! Put on their (heads) the *kuressar*! And take away from them your favor!” (i²⁵ n=asta ANA LÚ^{MES} arḫa LÚ NÍTA-tar tarḫūlitar (26) ḫaddulatar mālla GIS^S TUKUL^{HLA} GIS^S BAN^{HLA} GIS^S GAG.Ú.TAG.GA^{HLA} (27) GÍR dā n=at INA URU^U Hatti uda apedas=ma=kan ŠU-i (28) ŠA MUNUS-TI GIS^S ūhlali GIS^S ḫuisann=a dāi (29) nu=uš MUNUS-nili wēssiya nu=smas=kan TÚG^S kuressar sāi (30) nu=smas=kan tuēl assul arḫa dā) For discussion of *kuressar*, “cut of cloth, length (or width) of fabric”; “(woman’s) head-dress”, see HED K, 262ff.

⁴ Apparently Simone Lamante, Berlin/Firenze, has independently come to similar conclusions (pers. comm.). Moreover, I. Singer, who was kind enough to read a draft of this paper, pointed me to a discussion on Yahoo’s “Ancient Near East 2” discussion group in which Liz Fried of Ann Arbor expresses similar views. She writes (No. 10241; 19 Mar. 2009): “The Hittite Ritual Against Impotence is ‘for a man who has no desire for women’ (ANET p. 349). One phrase says: ‘See! I have taken womanliness away from you and given you back manliness. You have cast off the ways of a woman, now [show] the ways of a man.’ I mentioned once to a gay friend of mine that there was a Hittite incantation against homosexuality and I’ll never forget his immediate reply: ‘Does it work?’”

⁵ Paskuwatti’s Ritual has long been known to show quite a number of lexical, conceptual and typological similarities with Anniwiyani’s Ritual, so that their similarities encompass more than their common objective; and in fact, Ilan Peled presents in this issue an article in which he details his view that Anniwiyani’s Ritual should be understood as a ritual against passive homosexual behavior. Their undeniable similarities thus may render potentially convincing argumentation for either one of them being interpreted as an antidote to homosexual behavior more likely to apply to the other as well.

to him, “I myself⁶ have taken femininity away from you and given masculinity back to you. You have cast off the behavior [of a woman] and you [have taken] up the b[eha]vior of a man.”⁷ Such a rite, it may be suggested, would seem to make little sense if the ritual aims at restoring the man’s ability “to sustain an erection and consummate the act of intercourse”, as Hoffner (p. 287) supposes. The inability to sustain an erection is hardly a feminine trait to be taken away from the patient. No, the taking away of the patient’s feminine inclinations likely refers to something else. The passage seems considerably more sensible when viewed in light of the possibility that the ritual aims at curbing the patient’s passive homosexual inclination. He is to cast off what is generally viewed in traditional cultures as the expected sexually passive behavior of women, i.e. allowing oneself to be penetrated by a man, and to assume the active or aggressive role of the proper, dominant man, who is supposed to be the penetrator. Hoffner’s (p. 277, 283) translation of and commentary to *saklai-*, “expected (sexual) behavior”, also “custom; law”, is spot on, but he does not assess the relevance of the term in the context of the rites performed. It would seem odd to refer to a man’s failure to sustain an erection or ejaculate as *saklai-*, “behavior; custom”. One might expect it to be deemed in the Hittite conceptual world perhaps an “illness” (*inan*), “curse” (*hurtai-*), “impurity, contamination, defect” (*papratar*) or “evil matter” (*idalu uttar*). The use of the term *saklai-* is perfectly understandable, however, if it refers to the patient’s habit of engaging in homosexual encounters.

One could, of course, conceivably interpret the ritual as Moyer does (see above), as a rite to restore the patient’s masculinity and eradicate his feminine traits,⁸ and this may very well be part of the intention. The context, however, is quite different from that quoted by Moyer from the Prayer to Ištar of Nineveh (see n. 3), where it is clearly a matter of feminizing and thereby weakening a military threat while transferring the enemy’s masculine military prowess to the soldiers of Ḫatti.⁹ In Paskuwatti’s Ritual the intention seems, to the contrary, judging from the incipit, to aim at remedying the patient’s lack of

⁶ Following E. Rieken’s (2009) interpretation of *kasa* and *kasma* as lexemes of speaker/near and hearer/middle deixis, respectively; cf. GrHL §§24.27-24.30.

⁷ ^(i 26) [k]āsa=wa=ta=kkān MUNUS-tar arḫa dahḫun ⁽²⁷⁾nu=wa=tta EGIR-pa LÚ-tar peḫhun nu=wa=[za MUNUS-as⁷] ⁽²⁸⁾saklin arḫa namma peššiy[a]t ⁽²⁹⁾nu=wa=za sarā LÚ-as s[ak]lin [datta].

⁸ For recent discussion of this dichotomy, see Hutter (2003: 260f.).

⁹ Similarly Yakar and Taffet (2007: 783).

reproductive success and lack of desire for or competence regarding the opposite sex.¹⁰

This dominant male behavior, as opposed to passive female behavior, may perhaps also be the intention of the metaphor in §8, where the ritualist entreats Uliliyassi,¹¹ the goddess who is to alleviate the patient's malady, to "Turn your maidservant over to him, and he will become a yoke"¹² (similarly §14). A yoke, of course, is a heavy implement forced upon its object in order to control and dominate it, an attitude that the patient is to henceforth adopt, perhaps as opposed to being the passive partner controlled and dominated himself. Hoffner, in fact, was able to interpret the metaphor in a similar fashion within the traditional conception of the purpose of the ritual, suggesting that "the yoke in Hittite... symbolized domination. An impotent husband lost his wife's respect. And conversely, in order to produce children through his wife, the husband has to dominate; she must bear his yoke" (p. 286). This may perhaps have been an element of the conceptions in the minds of those involved in the ritual, but of course it is not the case that the husband must dominate his wife in order to impregnate her. And while it may be true that an impotent husband runs the risk of losing his wife's respect, it is not inevitably the case that a man who plays a more passive role toward his wife loses her respect, and even if he does, this must not necessarily impair the couple's reproductive success. The metaphor of the yoke therefore seems more fitting if one assumes the text to be a remedy for homosexual behavior, and especially for the passive role.

A further suggestive passage is found in §5, in which the ritualist continues her incantation, referring to the patient's apparent failure to find any interest in a virgin girl sent to him for the purpose, saying, "She"¹³ went down to his² loins,¹⁴ but this mortal (is) one of shit, one

¹⁰ "Thus (speaks) Paskuwatti, woman of Arzawa, who is, [however], in Parassa: 'If a man lacks progeny/fecundity (*hassatar*) or is not a man vis-à-vis a woman'" (i¹) *UMMA* ^f*Paskuwatti* *MUNUS* ^{URU}*Arzawa eszi*=*[ma=ss]an* (2) *INA* ^{URU}*Parassa mān LÚ-ni kuedani has[s]atar* (3) *NU.GÁL nasma=as MUNUS-ni menahhanda U[L L]Ú-as*.

¹¹ For thoughts on the nature of this deity, see most recently Hutter (2003: 238, with references to further literature).

¹² (ii 7) *nu=ssi GÉME-KA maniya*⁸ *hn=as=za* ^{GIS}*iyugan kisari*.

¹³ Hoffner (p. 277; similarly Melchert 2003: 283) translates "He went down to her...," which is not impossible, but the subject is likely, though not necessarily, the virgin of the previous, unfortunately largely lost clause, while the change in subject likely comes with "this mortal". Cf. also CHD Š, 41a.

¹⁴ For *antaka-*, "loins", see Melchert (2003).

of piss.”¹⁵ This phrase or slur is taken by Hoffner again as a “description of his impotence” (p. 284) and as language intended to make it clear that “the patient’s complaint was that he was unable to sustain an erection and consummate the act of intercourse. His problem then was not infertility (insufficient sperm), but impotence” (p. 287). This interpretation can presumably not be excluded. It is conceivable that such a slur might be used in referring to an impotent man. Perhaps “one of piss” would in this case refer to the man’s inability to accomplish anything with his penis other than urinating. It is not entirely apparent, however, why an impotent man might be “one of shit”. As a slur against a homosexual or homosexual behavior it would seem to make more sense, “one of shit” perhaps referring to one who engages in anal intercourse. Granted, with this interpretation it may be more difficult to come up with an explanation for “one of piss”. One possibility might perhaps be derived from Melchert’s attractive suggestion (2001: 406-408; 2003: 283), according to which the red-white color symbolism found in §4 would refer to sexual union and fertility, red symbolizing feminine blood, white signifying male semen. If this is indeed the case, then shit and piss might represent a contrast with the symbols of reproductive sexuality, i.e. Melchert’s heterosexually productive red and white vis-à-vis a hypothetical homosexually inert brown and yellow. The suggestion, of course, must remain entirely tentative until confirmed or invalidated by further evidence or considerations.

A further term that must be discussed in the light of the foregoing considerations is the word *hassatar* in obv. i 2. Hoffner translated “reproductive power”, a meaning the word can certainly denote. As he himself relates (p. 282-283), however, the word has a rather wide semantic range, and it is not unlikely that the meaning chosen by Hoffner and previous researchers may have been influenced by their assumption that the ritual was dealing with male impotence. If one considers what one should translate beginning from the hypothesis that the ritual might be intended to remedy homosexual behavior, one might opt for a translation “progeny” or “family”. The lack of any offspring would, of course, have been one of the major reasons why homosexual behavior might have been taboo. An emphasis on reproduction as an element of blessedness and success is thoroughly

¹⁵ (i 34) ... nu=wa=ssi=kan andakitti=ssi ⁽³⁵⁾kattanta pait nu=wa kās tantukesnas DUMU-as ⁽³⁶⁾saknas siehunas.

attested in the Hittite texts and is naturally a universal cultural constant derived directly from biological necessity.

The final passage that might conceivably, but not necessarily, be more readily interpreted in light of the suggested hypothesis is the incubation episode of §15,¹⁶ where one reads, “The patient goes to sleep, and whether he sees the goddess *bodily* (*tuēkki=ssi*) in a dream, (whether) he goes down to/with her (*katti=ssi paizzi*) and he sleeps with her, throughout the three days during which [I] entr[eat] the goddess he reports whatever dreams he sees, whether the goddess shows her eyes to him (or) whether the goddess lies down with him”.¹⁷ It seems that the dreams predicted to indicate the success of the rites might be thought to reveal whether the man has developed a desire for women, perhaps as opposed to his previously demonstrated desire for a male partner. There seems to be little indication that the dreams are to be interpreted as indicating the patient’s successfully attaining an erection and ejaculation. A patient’s failure to maintain an erection does not by any means indicate that he has no desire for sex with a woman—to the contrary, men with erectile dysfunction often enough have a strong desire for sex, including heterosexual encounters, as amply attested by the financial success of Viagra—so it would perhaps have made little difference if the patient dreamed of a woman or a goddess if his problem was one of impotence.¹⁸ If one assumes that the patient had a tendency to be attracted to and seek out male partners, however, the ritualist might have supposed that his dreaming of a sexual encounter with a woman or a goddess should indicate his reform and thus the success of her ritual practices.

The indications in the text are not wholly unequivocal; otherwise the hypothesis suggested in this paper surely would have been forwarded long ago. It does seem, however, that a reasonably convincing case can be made for the proposition that a number of passages can be more readily interpreted in light of the assumption that the ritual is intended as an antidote to (especially passive) homosexual behavior

¹⁶ For discussion on the dream elements in the ritual see Mouton (2007; 70-74, 129-141 and *passim*).

¹⁷ ^(iv)1) *nu=za BĒL SISKUR seszi* ⁽²⁾*nu=za=kan mān DINGIR-LU₄ zašhiya* ⁽³⁾*tuēkki=ssi auszi katti=ss[i]* ⁽⁴⁾*paizzi n=as=si katti=ssi seszi* ⁽⁵⁾*kuitman=ma DINGIR-LU₄ INÁ UD.3.KAM=ma mug[āmi]* ⁽⁶⁾*nu=za=kan zašhimus kuiēs uskezz[i]* ⁽⁷⁾*n=as memiskezzi mān=si DINGIR-LU₄* ⁽⁸⁾*IGI^{HLA}-wa parā tekkusnuskezz[i]* ⁽⁹⁾*nu=ssi mān DINGIR-LU₄ katti=ssi* ⁽¹⁰⁾*seszi*.

¹⁸ It may have been the case, of course, that erectile dysfunction would have been associated in the Hittite mind with a lack of desire for a feminine object. Indeed, such errant associations are hardly a foreign element among accepted views regarding sexual mores in any given society.

rather than as traditionally understood, as a remedy for erectile and/or ejaculatory dysfunction.

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