

Abhandlung

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Nocturnal Transgressions

A Study on the Sexual Implications of the Idiom *maldī (erši)... etēqu*<https://doi.org/10.1515/za-2025-0014>

Abstract: This paper discusses the idiom *maldī erši... etēqu* “to cross the edge of the bed of ...”, primarily known from the incantation *ša maldī eršīya itiqu*, which is attested on numerous amulets and in the series *Ḫulbazizi* from the first millennium BCE. It examines textual evidence found in legal documents and letters from the Middle Babylonian period, where an abbreviated form of the idiom is used, implying an act of illegal sexual transgression (*maldī ... etēqu*). It will be argued that the idiom carries the same meaning in the incantation *ša maldī eršīya itiqu*, where it denotes the demon as a possible succubus or incubus.

In dedication to F. A. M. Wiggermann†

Introduction

The word **mašdu* (*maldu*) is a primary noun of the *pars* pattern referring to the edge or border of something.¹ It does not occur prior to the Middle Babylonian period and is only attested as a plural form in the status constructus, with or without pronominal suffixes (*maldī-*). The realization *mašdu* in dictionaries is based on a possible (and damaged) entry in the lexical list *Nabnītu*; however, this entry remains problematic and is unlikely to be correct.² This makes the realization as *mašdu* reasonable but uncertain, as it presumes a sound change from /šd/ to /ld/ and a reading of the final consonant as /d/, though /t/ is equally

possible.³ In the incantation *ša maldī eršīya itiqu*, it is interpreted as “the edges of the bed”; however, it can otherwise refer to a geographical feature, such as a river or the border of a country.⁴

Attestations of *maldu* are very limited, but it does not appear to be synonymous with *pattu* “border (district)”. Instead, it is almost always used to refer to the edge of a reedbed, river or bed. The common aspect among these three concepts is the presence of reeds. Old Babylonian clay models depict braided reed as the mattress of a simple bed.⁵ This is best illustrated in LB 1508 + LB 1509 (figure 1). This shows a geometric pattern of reeds bound at the four edges of the frame, which would presumably be the **mašdu*.⁶ Nonetheless, the **mašdu* would also function as a type of border that can be crossed (*etēqu*). This is evident in a literary letter to the Assyrian king Mutakkil-Nusku: *ma-al-di Aššur^{ki} ana etēqīšunu* “in order to cross the borders of Assyria” (Llop/George 2001/2002, 3: 24). The exact context remains uncertain due to the damaged nature of the letter. However, the noun occurs two more times, indicating the **mašdu* is an area of territory on which one could live: *ina ma-al-di-ia ašbāta* “you live at my borders” (l. 59b', cf. 37).

1 See AHW. 625a; CAD M/1, 363. Some attestations of **mašdu* as referring to part of the edge of the bed are included in AHW. (p. 649) under *mešū* “drying process”. Note for the reference ZA 16, 180: 43, the correction by Farber (2014, 248) to be actually taken from *bardū* “cross-piece” confirmed by a MB parallel. For *pars* as a primary noun, see ³GAG (p. 71 § 55b) and Fox (2003, 131–133) under the term “isolated noun”. Note that *mašdu* has no known Semitic cognates.

2 This has already been noted by the editors of the CAD (M/1, 363) and also by Gurney (1982, 93).

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3 There are similarities with *šiddu* “long side” in terms of semantics and consonantal structure, especially when *šiddu* is used to describe the bank of a river (CAD Š/2, 405). However, *šiddu* is derived from *šadādu* “to drag”, which is not possible for *mašdu*.

4 See for example Sennacherib: *ša ultu mal-di nāri ašbata* “(land) that I took from the riverbank”, RINAP 3/1 22 vi 49–50.

5 This may be compared with the lacing of the Ancient Egyptian beds, which was used as a support for a mattress (Peck 2013, 87).

6 For a recent discussion and photograph of the object, see Waal/van Zoest (2024, 30–31).



Fig. 1: Old Babylonian clay model of a bed (LB 1508 + LB 1509). Photo by Cees de Jonge, 2021. © The Netherlands Institute for the Near East, Leiden.

This statement is followed by the question *ammēni lā tēbiramma* “why did you not cross?” (l. 60). Despite the broken character of the letter, it appears that **mašdu* may again refer to a river (area).

The Idiom *maldī (eršī) ... etēqu* in Middle Babylonian

The idiom *maldī (eršī) ... etēqu* is attested in two Middle Babylonian tablets. The first and only previously published attestation occurs in a tablet from Ur, MBTU 8 (line copy UET 7, 8).⁷ The document pertains to a settlement in a legal case regarding divorce and adultery. Some details of this well-known legal document remain debated; however, the main point is that a woman named Ilātu detained the wife of Sîn-erēmāni and compelled him to divorce her. It has been suggested that Ilātu worked at an inn and may have been a prostitute (Stol 2016, 415–416). This follows the use of the unclear word *napṭarūtu* (AHw. 1678b; CAD N₁, 326a), which may be connected to a guesthouse or inn (*napṭartu*).⁸ However, this semantic connection is not nec-

essary, as *napṭar(t)u*, as a deverbal noun, can (and has) multiple meanings. Other interpretations seem possible here.⁹ Nonetheless, the assumption that Ilātu was a prostitute may stem from a parallel with the Codex Lipit-Ištar § 30, which forbade a man from marrying a prostitute after the judges instructed him not to see her. This decree would remain unchanged even after he divorced his wife and paid divorce money.¹⁰ The brother of this man did not approve of these affairs and took the matter to the judge, who interrogated Ilātu and asked her reasons for causing the divorce. Ilātu responded that, (allegedly) “Sîn-(e)rēmāni, the servant of my lord, has slept with me repeatedly until now” (*Sîn-(e)rēmāni arad bēlīya adikanni itaḥzanni-mi*, ll. 16–17). However, following this admission, she conceded: “Since my lord has asked me (about this), he will not cross the edges of my bed (anymore).”¹¹ Following this, the judge determined that Sîn-erēmāni would be punishable if he entered Ilātu’s house again: “(If) Sîn-(e)rēmāni returns and enters the house of Ilātu to relax during the day or spend the night, he will be imprisoned.”¹² The idiom *maldī*

⁷ In addition to the main edition in MBTU no. 8, the text has been edited and translated by Gurney (1982), Wilcke (1980) and Westbrook (1984).

⁸ See also the *napṭartu* “guesthouse(?)” in a Middle Assyrian letter, VFMS 2/III, 12: 15. The occurrence of a *napṭartu* in two documents from Middle Babylonian Dūr-Enlilē (CUSAS 37, 81:2; CUSAS 37, 180: 12) could be explained similarly (see SAD 4, 123). However, both attestations lack the required context to determine whether we are dealing with a building/institute or something else.

⁹ The full phrase is *ana napṭarūti iklāšīma*, “(Ilātu) detained her (the wife) for *n*.” l. 5. Several meanings of *napṭar(t)u* are known. See, in particular, Durand (2000, 286–287) regarding the possibilities of a *napṭartu*-woman being a “concubine” or “woman-of-second-rank”. Considering that *napṭarūtu* refers to the legal wife of Sîn-erēmāni, the connection between Ilātu and an inn becomes unlikely. See also Gurney (1982, 92); Wilcke (1980, 140); Westbrook (1984, 755 fn. 27).

¹⁰ See Westbrook (1984) for further reference to the Old Babylonian legal document BM 13912, in which a woman (presumably a prostitute) promises to cease sexual relations with a man.

¹¹ See also Slanski (2003, 491); Stol (2016, 415).

¹² See van Soldt (1978, 500–501) and Wilcke (1980, 138).

(*erši*) ... *etēqu* “to cross the edges (of the bed)” has a clear sexual connotation. This is further hinted at when the judge decides that *Sîn-erēmāni* should not enter the house again to relax or spend the night. When *Ilātu* described the affair, she used the term *ītaḥzanni-mi*, a verbal form of *aḥāzu* “to take,” which is often used in the sense of “to marry,” but in a few instances has a more basic meaning of “to take (sexually).”¹³ The latter interpretation is supported by the use of the *Gtn*-stem for frequentative action (Kouwenberg 1997, 80–81), and the absence of any statement indicating that *Sîn-erēmāni* and *Ilātu* had legally married following the divorce. The nature of the dispute is not entirely clear in the document. *Sîn-erēmāni* had formally divorced his wife, and it is not her family who brought the case to the judge, but rather the brother of the defendant. Stol (2016, 416) suggests he was standing up for his family’s honour; however, one may wonder whether financial issues regarding the dowry or bride wealth were the actual source of the problem. It may be noted that there are hints in the Nippur documents that polygyny was practiced by some men (Tenney 2011, 88–90). This brings us to the second attestation of *maldī* (*erši*) ... *etēqu* in the letter report Ni 2370. As an unpublished document, an edition will be provided to this paper as an appendix, see below. The author, *Ninurta-muballī*, mentions that the sons of *Uballissu* carried away the sons of *Kuppupu* the sailor for undisclosed reasons, but states that nobody transgressed their sides. The context of this statement is not explicitly described, but with the current attestations of the idiom *maldī* (*erši*) ... *etēqu* it seems possible that the borders referred to the edges of the bed, i.e., that nobody slept with them, possibly indicating that they remained unmarried. As to why such information could be relevant in a letter report, it must be considered that these people lived as servile labourers under the responsibility of these officials and information on their family state could be of relevance for their living conditions and rations. The letter states that these children had been taken away for three years, a period in which much could have happened to the social status of these children.

¹³ See Westbrook (1984, 755–56 fn. 28; 1988, 16b); Slanski (2003, 503); Mayer (2016, 183).

The Incantation *ša maldī eršiya itiqu*

The incantation *ša maldī eršiya itiqu*¹⁴ is well-attested in the first millennium BCE, appearing on numerous amulets¹⁵ and occurring in the series *Ḥulbazizi* no. 60 (Finkel 1976, 130–131). Interestingly, it is the most common incantation on *Lamaštu* amulets in this period, though not directly concerned with the demoness herself (Wiggermann 2000, 223). Contrary to the regular *Lamaštu* corpus, evil in this incantation is portrayed anonymously and addressed with masculine forms. This follows the general principle of the *Ḥulbazizi* corpus, which could be employed in magical practices against any evil fitting the description of the corresponding incantation (Finkel 1976, 72). Therefore, it is unsurprising that various *Ḥulbazizi* incantations appear on *Lamaštu* amulets.¹⁶ The case of *Ḥulbazizi* no. 60 *ša maldī eršiya itiqu* is particularly intriguing, as it reveals possible additional aspects of *Lamaštu*’s behaviour. A full edition of the spell was provided by Wilhelm (1979), and a composite version is presented here for the convenience of the reader.¹⁷

<i>ša maldī eršiya itiqu</i>	The one who transgressed the edges of my bed,
<i>upalliḥanni ušagiranni</i>	frightened me, caused me panic,
<i>šunāti pardāti ukallimanni</i>	made me see terrifying dreams,
<i>ana Bidu atūgal eršetim lipqīdūšu</i>	may they commit him to Bidu, chief doorkeeper of the Netherworld!
<i>ina qibūt Ninurta apli ašarēdi māri rāmi</i>	On the command of Ninurta, foremost son (and) beloved child;

¹⁴ In light of the Middle Babylonian evidence for this idiom, we render a plural (*maldī*) instead of the presumed singular (*maldī*) used in previous studies (e.g., Wilhelm 1979, 40; Heeßel 2002, 97).

¹⁵ *Lamaštu* amulets: (3), (4), (7), (8), (23), (36), (37) and (40), see Thureau-Dangin (1921); (54), (61) and (62), see Farber (1980–83, 441); (75), see Farber (1997, 115); *Pazuzu* amulet (14), see Heeßel (2002, 121).

¹⁶ *Ḥulbazizi* inscriptions: no. 2 appears on *Lamaštu* amulet (15) and Finkel 1976, pl. 45 (I); no. 38 is found on *Lamaštu* amulets (13), (78) as well as BM 127371; no. 48, no. 62 and no. 65 are all inscribed on *Lamaštu* amulet (61), see Zomer 2018, 21 fn. 55. Additionally, *Ḥulbazizi* no. 17 occurs on a *Pazuzu* head (CUSAS 32, 66).

¹⁷ In addition to Wilhelm (1979), we note that un-catalogued *Lamaštu* amulets containing *Ḥulbazizi* no. 60 are BM 104891 (Finkel 1976, pl. 53), BM 117759 (Finkel 1976, pl. 55), Ki 1902-5-10, 36 (Finkel 1975, pl. 54) and the later-published *Lamaštu* amulet (75), see Fales (1989, 230) and *Pazuzu* amulet (14), see Heeßel (2002, 121). For further details on *Ḥulbazizi* inscriptions, see Finkel (1976, 130–131).

a-ra₂ du₁₀-ga / dumu a-ra₂ du₁₀-ga “Lamaštu, child of An, infamous among the gods, Ardat-lilī, good child, good child! (STT 144 r. 1’–4’ // AuOr Suppl. 23, 69; Farber 2014, 300). This, combined with the fact that Ḫulbazizi no. 60 *ša maldī eršīya itiqu* is the most common incantation distributed on Lamaštu amulets in the first millennium BCE, suggests that Lamaštu in this period was regarded as having the capacity of a succubus, sharing features with the li₂-demons. Moreover, it would explain why the demon Pazuzu, who calls himself “king of the li₂-demons” (cf. Heeßel 2002, 65–66), depicted with an erect serpentine penis, is commonly used in this period as a nemesis against the apparently sexually unsatisfied side of Lamaštu.²³

Appendix: Ni 2370, a Middle Babylonian Letter from Nippur

The letter report Ni 2370 is previously unpublished. It measures approximately 88 × 60 × 20 mm and has a well-preserved obverse. Although the bottom part has broken off, not much seems to be missing. However, the reverse is almost completely destroyed to the point of becoming illegible. It appears to have space for about eight lines, followed by a ruling, after which the tablet remains uninscribed. The tablet is part of the Nippur collection at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum and was collated by de Ridder in December 2022.²⁴

²³ As such, Lamaštu embodies now all aspects shared with the biblical figure Lilith who as the first wife of Adam becomes the infamous baby snatching succubus in later Judaic traditions especially known from the Judaic-Aramaic incantation bowls. This confirms the suspicion by Wiggermann (2000, 227–228) that Lamaštu incorporating the sexual aspects of li₂-demons can be regarded as a kind of demonic forerunner to the figure of Lilith. Like Lamaštu, Lilith is also subject to a demonic king known by the epithet Bagdana (alternatively as Qiṭrus, Iqarus, or Tiqos, see Gabbay 2010).

²⁴ Several people deserve thanks facilitating the visit to the Istanbul Museum. Foremost among them, Prof. John Brinkman kindly provided numerous tablet numbers from the museum. Additionally, Selim Adalı and Milge Özcan were instrumental in assisting during the visit to the museum. Most Middle Babylonian letters from Nippur have remained unpublished. However, editions of two letters (Ni 1284 and Ni 2696) from the correspondence of LĀL-ŪR-ALIM to Martukku were provided by de Ridder (2023).

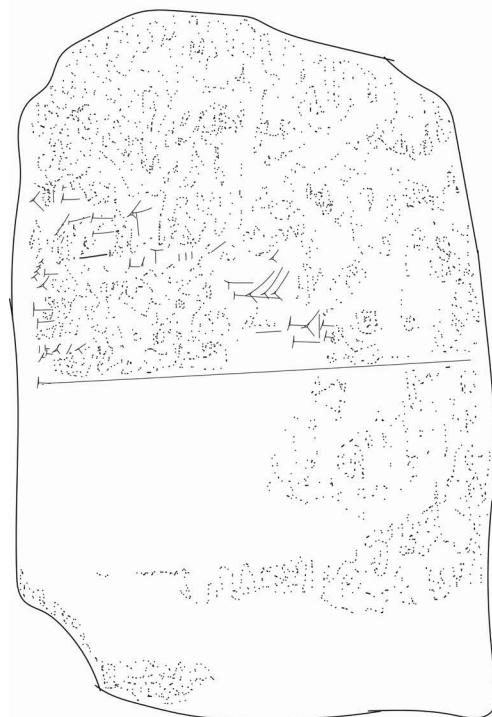
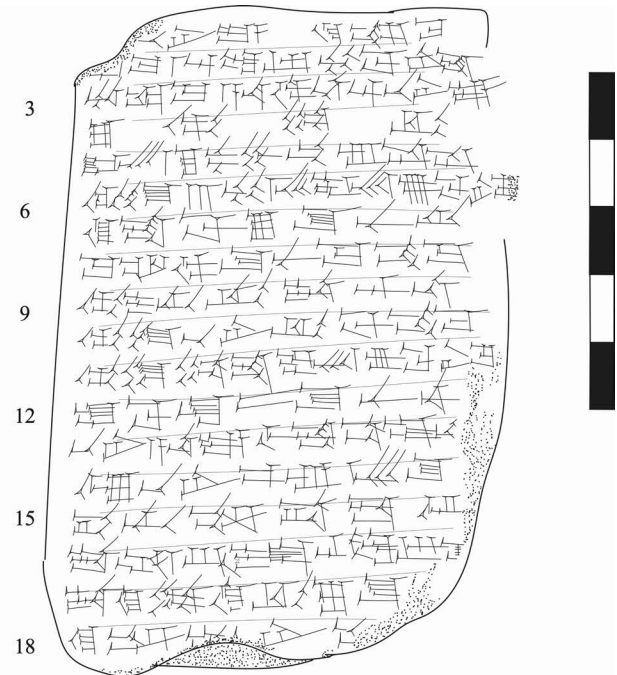


Fig. 2: Copy of Ni 2370.

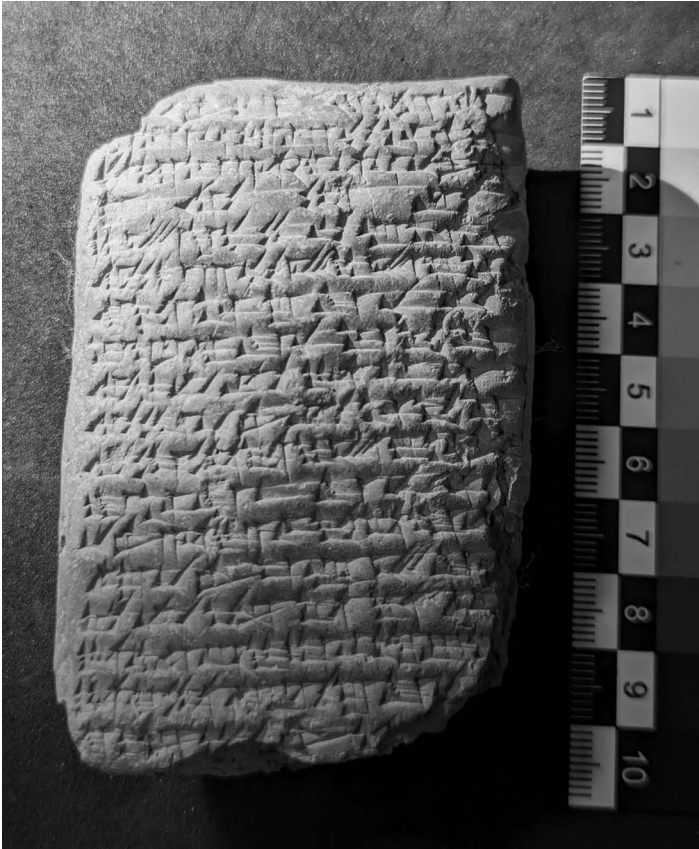


Fig. 3a: Photo of Ni 2370 (obverse)

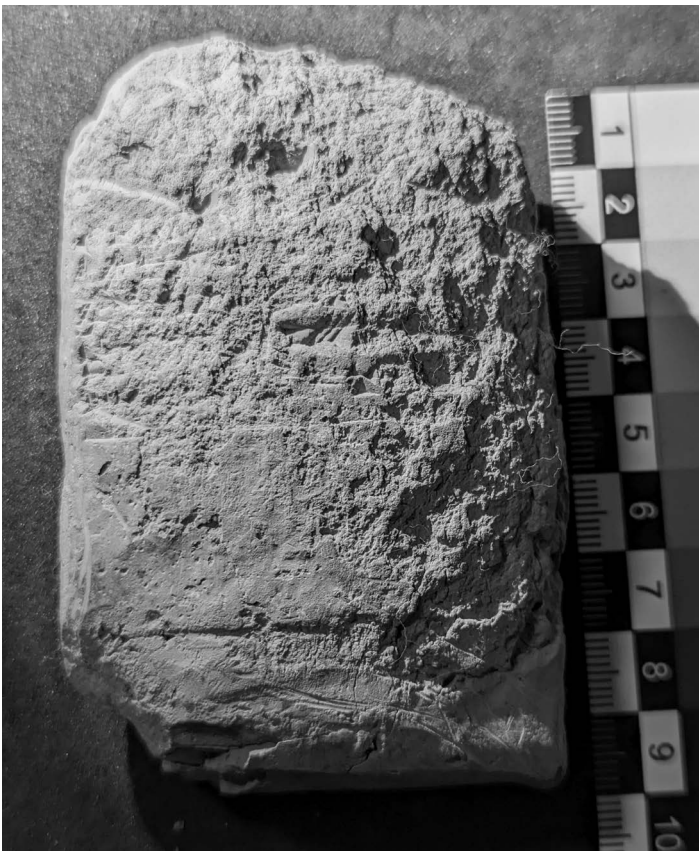


Fig. 3b: Photo of Ni 2370 (reverse)

- obv. 1 [a-na] be-lí-ia qí-bi-ma¹
 2 [u]m-ma ^{m.d}nin-urta-mu-ba-lí-iṭ
 3 arad(ARAD)-ka-ma a-na di-na-an be-lí-ia
 4 lu-ul-li-ik
 5 māri(DUMU.MEŠ) ^mku-up-pu-pí malāḫi(MÁ.LAH₅)
 6 ul^l-tu 3 šanāti(MU.MEŠ) mārū(DUMU.MEŠ)
^mú-ba-lí-s[u]
 7 ki it-ba-lu-šu-nu-ti
 8 ma-al-di-šu-nu ma-am-ma
 9 ul i-ti-iq i+na-an-na
 10 ul-tu be-lí-ia-ba-am-ma
 11 ul-tu le-et māri(DUMU.MEŠ) ^mú-ba-lí-su
 12 at-ba-la-šu-nu-t[i]
 13 be-lí-a-na ia-ši it-ta-ad-n[a-šu-nu-ti]
 14 ù be-lí eleppātu(^{gis}MÁ.MEŠ)-šu [(x)]
 15 qá-ti il-ta-ṭa-al[r (x)]
 16 i+na maḫ-ri-i mār(DUMU) ^{m.d}nin-urta-s[AG(-DINGIR.
 MEŠ)]
 17 ^ri+na^r ki-li ki ik-lu-šu-^rma^r
 18 ^rki al-qu-ni^r a[m^r ...]
 rev. (only vague traces of ca. 8 lines than uninscribed)

Translation

- ¹ Speak [to] my lord:
² [th]us Ninurta-muballit, your servant.
³⁻⁴ I want to go as a substitute for my lord.
⁵⁻⁷ When the sons of Uballissu took away the sons of Kuppupu the sailor three years ago, nobody crossed the edge of their (bed) (i.e., slept with them).
⁹⁻¹² Now, since my lord commanded me, I have taken them (i.e., the sons of Kuppupu) away from the responsibility of the sons of Uballissu.
¹³⁻¹⁴ My lord has given it [it(?)] to me, and my lord has written (that) his ships are(!) finished.
¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Earlier he held the son of Ninurta-aš[arēd(-ilāni)] in prison.
¹⁸ When I brought (it) here [...]

Commentary

2) *Ninurta-muballit* is a common name in the Middle Babylonian corpus. Hölscher (1996, 5) distinguishes between eight different individuals attested in 21 different texts. There do not seem to be any of them to which we can assign the *Ninurta-muballit* from this Istanbul letter. There is at least another letter report (Ni 9039) written by an individual with the same name. However, it is notable that a different spelling is used (^{m.d}nin-urta-mu-ba-li-i[ṭ-ma] l. 2). Only about half of this letter is preserved, but it seems to deal partly

with a day-to-day report on his journey between Nippur and Bazātu (Nashef 1982, 51) as well as the opening of a *pal-gu*-canal (ll. 3–7).

5) *Kuppupu* is another common name, used for approximately five known individuals from Nippur, none of whom are identified as boatmen (Hölscher 1996, 127). The name itself follows the *purrus* D-stem adjective pattern, probably referring to the curviness of one's back (Kouwenberg 1997, 376). The name may be realized as **Kubbubu* in Middle Babylonian based on the use of the sign BI instead of BU, also found at Kassite Ur (^mku-up-pu-pí MBTU 18:1). For the profession of boatsman in Nippur, see Sassmannshausen (2001, 116); Tenney (2011, 99, 104). Additional attestations from unpublished Istanbul material are provided by Brinkman (1980, 19 fn. 19).

6) *Uballissu* is a common hypocoristic name of the type *Uballissu*-DN. Only Marduk is attested as a theophoric element in Nippur (Hölscher 1996, 225) with only one possible exception.²⁵

16) The name *Ninurta-ašarēd(-ilāni)* is used for approximately 12 different individuals in Nippur (Hölscher 1996, 154). It may be noted that a person named *Ninurta-ašarēd-il-āni* wrote the unpublished letter report Ni 9026, which deals with cattle but also mentions a *Ninurta-muballit* (r. 3).

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²⁵ The name ^mTI-SU-DINGIR (MUN 57:8) is read as *Uballissu-ilu* by Sassmannshausen (2001, 496).

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