

When ancient historian Klaus Geus introduced the useful idea of ‘common sense geography,’ to Classical studies, he may not at first have been aware of how widely applicable the idea is to other ancient disciplines as well. In Geus’ sphere of interests, for instance, ancient mariners -- while unable to calculate distances with modern instruments -- relied upon their own mental models of geography which they could apply to navigation, as a form of widely shared intuitive knowledge which they could rely upon.<sup>2</sup> Within ancient medicine, this same notion of ‘common sense’ can usefully describe the kind of implicit knowledge and mental models of anatomy and physiology widely disseminated by physicians and scholars throughout the Mediterranean and Near East, although ancients lacked the comprehensive understanding of the human body which is so basic to modern medicine. The notion of ‘common sense anatomy’ allows us to evaluate ancient knowledge structures (so aptly described by Geus and others in his circle) of Mesopotamian medicine within its own framework, without the interference of modern theory based upon vastly superior technical information regarding the body itself and how it functions, both physically and socially.

This approach to ancient Mesopotamian medicine is not universally accepted and is challenged by recent studies which rely upon modern diagnostics<sup>3</sup> or physical and biological

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<sup>1</sup> This text began as a review of Giola Zisa, *The Loss of Male Sexual Desire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), but Zisa's excellent study requires a detailed discussion.

<sup>2</sup> See Klaus Geus and Martin Thiering (eds), *Features of Common Sense Geography – Implicit Knowledge Structures in Ancient Geographical Texts* (“Antike Kultur und Geschichte”, Bd 16, Berlin: Lit Verlag), 2014, 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. J. Scurlock and B. Andersen, *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine. Ancient Sources, Translations, and Modern Medical Analyses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2005, a lengthy study based almost entirely upon retrospective diagnoses.

science to enhance our knowledge of ancient pharmaceuticals.<sup>4</sup> It is a temptation hard to resist, and the present author is also guilty of attempting to use Freud to interpret ancient magic.<sup>5</sup> While none of these studies shows much sophistication in the use of modern theory to explain ancient science, the same cannot be said for a recent study by Giola Zisa, which is a readable and thoughtful treatment of one aspect of Mesopotamian healing arts, interwoven with a thorough treatment of modern theories invoked to help explain ancient attitudes and practices. The subject matter concerns the most intimate arena of human interaction, involving sexuality, impotence, and physical desire, based upon a group of incantations and rituals known as ŠÀ.ZI.GA in Sumerian and *nīš libbi* in Akkadian, literally meaning 'rising / raising of the heart', previously thought to refer to penile erection but interpreted in this new study as male 'sexual desire'.<sup>6</sup> Zisa's monograph, based upon his Munich dissertation (under the supervision of Walther Sallaberger) offers a new edition of the ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations and rituals to replace the hitherto standard study of Robert Biggs from 1967,<sup>7</sup> as well as a new understanding of this text, i.e. its uses and applications and theories behind it. Zisa's fulsome treatment is broadly steeped in anthropological theory,

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<sup>4</sup> D. Stein, S. Kiehl Costello, K. Pollinger Foster (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 26-70, drawing freely upon anthropology and cognitive science to support suppositions regarding the use of psychedelic drugs and other substances in antiquity which cannot be identified by philological data.

<sup>5</sup> 'Freud and Mesopotamian Magic,' in Tzvi Abusch and Karel van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic. Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives* (Ancient Magic and Divination 1). Groningen: Styx, 1999, 49–55.

<sup>6</sup> For independent evidence from the Roman world of 'sexual desire' rather than priapism, cf. Christopher Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Univ. of Penn Press, 2018), 279, which translates a Latin text from Marcellus of Bordeaux consisting of recipes for treating sexual drive rather than specifically erectile dysfunction.

Stimulating sex drive: The right testicle of a rooster in ram-skin tied under the neck; also the ash of a newt (*stelio*) wound up in linen and carried in the left hand. Stimulating sex drive: The newt (*stelio*) that lives in the walls: make it into a plaster of *pittacium* and place on the big toe of the right foot and on the left foot if you want to inhibit desire.

This text strangely resembles Akkadian medical rituals using geckos from a wall (Latin *stelio* can also mean 'gecko'), as well as ŠÀ.ZI.GA rituals, cf. Zisa p. 287: 'Its ritual: You dry and crush a green frog, in the powder of the [...] -plant you mix (it) together with oil from the alabastron, together with water ... [...] with] oil you anoint the patient.'

<sup>7</sup> R. Biggs, *ŠÀ.ZI.GA Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Locust Valley: J. J. Augustine, 1967).

which guides his analysis along with a thorough grasp of the philology of the incantations and rituals, which have always been open to a variety of conflicting interpretations. This particular theme encourages anthropological approaches more than other types of Mesopotamian healing therapies, since the topic of impotence or sexual appetite or even release of sexual tension has both physical and psychological dimensions which cross cultural boundaries and transcend time periods, since the problems involved are virtually universal within medicine and magic systems. In Mesopotamia, sexual performance is particularly well documented within ŠÀ.ZI.GA spells and rituals and merits the type of analysis afforded in Zisa's study, going beyond the confines of philology. Nevertheless, this does not mean that one can accept all of Zisa's analyses or conclusions.

To comprehend the problem more fully, it is worth going back to basics and to reconsider the full range of meanings of ŠÀ / *libbu* in the context of Mesopotamian anatomy, both as indicating a region of the body and a metaphor for an organ of cognition. Like Greek *kardia*, the essential meaning is 'heart', but with wider anatomical connections with the abdomen or stomach or even as a general term for internal organs. Although at first seemingly obvious, difficulties immediately arise, such as in attempting to identify the region of the body known as SAG.ŠÀ / *rēš libbi*, lit. 'head of the heart', usually translated perfunctorily as 'epigastrium'; but where is this? The question is not trivial, since it is challenging to gauge to which part of the abdomen the *rēš libbi* refers, and although this significant component of human anatomy occurs frequently in medical therapies, it hardly features in incantations or rituals. It is unlikely, however, for the 'head' of the *libbu* to indicate the 'heart', since virtually nothing was known to ancient physicians about the heart as an organ and its key physiological functions, nor was awareness of the pulse necessarily associated with the heart. However, the character of the heart organ as the centre of

cognition is apparent in legal language, such as in contracts and letters, in which expressions such as *tūb libbi* and *hūd libbi* accompany completed transactions which meet the requirements of 'good will' or 'satisfaction' of both parties involved.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of 'good of heart' (*tūb libbi*) or 'joy of heart' (*hūd libbi*) is a metaphor not necessarily intended to focus on the physical organ but on a general concept of the centre of cognition within the human torso. But could *libbu* ever refer to the 'mind' in reference to the head? If so, this broadens the semantic range of possible anatomical meanings of *libbu*, and hence by the same token it could also refer to the genitals as a centre of sexual desire in the expression ŠÀ.ZI.GA or *nīš libbi*, the topic of Zisa's book. Let us explore this possibility further, so see where it leads us.

The usual understanding among medical historians is that, although Aristotle still adhered to the idea of 'heart' and 'mind', only in the late antiquity of Galen and his Byzantine successors was the brain fully recognised for what we know it to be today. This is in itself somewhat surprising, since one imagines that anyone with a head injury (probably not so uncommon in antiquity) would show indications of impaired speech, memory, or reasoning, and that this should have been associated with the brain. There are, however, many other examples within the history of medicine in which what now seems obvious in retrospect was missed.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there are some indications that Babylonians associated the *libbu* with *muhhu*, the cranium or brain.

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. for example A. R. George, *Old Babylonian Texts in the Schoyen Collection* (CUSAS 36, 2018, Bethesda: CDL Press, 2018), 84, *li-ba-ka lu-ti-ib-bi*, 'I will gladden your heart' (make you content), and see also p. 119, *li-ib-bi a-wi-lim ú-ta-ab*, 'I will satisfy the man'. A good summary of idiomatic uses of *libbu* can also be found in R. Whiting, *Old Babylonian Letters from Tell Asmar* (AS 22, Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1987), 151. The same expression was borrowed into Aramaic legal documents from Elephantine, see Y. Muffs, *Studies in the Aramaic Legal Papyri from Elephantine* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 27-29.

<sup>9</sup>Babylonians, for instance, apparently failed to connect lungs with respiration. Breathing introduced air (or wind) into the body via the neck or throat, but the lungs were likely to have been associated with digestion.

One of the important Akkadian medical compositions has as its title the incipit, *šumma amēlu muhhašu ummu ūkal*, 'if a man's *muhhu* contains heat', probably referring to fever, with the term *muhhu* (lit. 'top part, above') translated as 'cranium'. However, in this description of a non-exceptional pathology, it is hardly likely for fever to affect only the top of a patient's head, which is the reason why Akkadian *muhhu* in this instance has occasionally been translated according to its Semitic cognates (e.g. Hebrew *mwh*) as 'brain'.<sup>10</sup> 'Brain fever' as an indication that the internal cranium (*muhhu*) head 'contained heat / fever' would be a good candidate for common sense anatomy, without assuming that anyone was aware of the cognitive function of the brain as an organ. A somewhat similar association occurs with Greek *phren*, the 'diaphragm', with the plural *phrenes* usually indicating the heart or mind, considered to be the physical centre for thought and feelings. However, there is an interesting analogy with Akkadian *muhhu* containing fever and *phrenitis* ('inflammation of the *phren* / *phrenes*') indicated by fever as well as mental illness such as mania and melancholy, since later medical writers, especially Galen, considered the *phrenes* to refer to the brain.<sup>11</sup> The question is whether any of the Greek evidence for *phrenitis* might resonate within Akkadian medicine.<sup>12</sup> It is highly unlikely, for instance, that in the 7th century BCE, Babylonian medicine would have anticipated later Greek writers in associating the brain with cognition, even if *muhhu* could refer to this organ. One possible solution to this conundrum is that Akkadian *muhhu* referred to the inner cranium (i.e. brain)

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<sup>10</sup> See J. G. Westenholz and M. Sigrist, 'The Brain, the Marrow and the Seat of Cognition in Mesopotamian Tradition', *Journal de Médecines Cunéiformes* 7 (2006), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Even within the Hippocratic Corpus *phrenitis* was accompanied by a deranged mind, see R. Gäbel, *Aetius of Amida on Diseases of the Brain* (STMAC 13, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 157ff., for a useful discussion of *phrenitis* and a summary of conflicting opinions among ancient authors.

<sup>12</sup>C. Thumiger, 'Information and History of Psychiatry, the Case of the Disease *phrenitis*', in C. Meyns (ed.), *Information and the History of Psychiatry* (London, 2021), 60-61, in which Thumiger argues that while Gr. *phren* referred to the diaphragm, the *phrenes* or 'mind' could somehow be de-localised in relation to the disease of *phrenitis*. It is far from clear how and at what point the shift took place in which the *phrenes* came to refer to the brain, rather than diaphragm. Thumiger's article effectively explains the problem without actually resolving it.

without attributing any functional significance to it, apart from its susceptibility to fever. Greeks (Hippocratics, Diocles, Aristotle) at first agreed with Babylonian concepts of the heart as the centre of cognition and emotion, but the condition of *phrenitis* indicating inflammation, as well as a deranged or altered mental state, could easily be applied to whatever part of the anatomy one habitually associated cognition; for this reason, even relatively early Greek medical authorities such as Erasistratus (3rd cent. BCE) could associate *phrenitis* with the brain.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Babylonian medicine may have already paved the way for Erasistratus, since the *muhhu* containing heat could have offered a useful model for *phrenitis* as brain fever.

There is further evidence, however, for at least one precocious Babylonian scholar may have toyed with the idea of the *libbu* being a cerebral organ associated with mental illness. The text, the 'Taxonomy of Uruk', divides the human body into four general regions associated with specific organs, namely *libbu* 'heart (mind)', *pî karši* 'mouth of the stomach', *hašû* 'lungs', and *kalâti*, 'kidneys'; each of these regions is associated with specific ailments.<sup>14</sup> There are two significant or even slightly odd features of this unique tablet. First, the usual ordering sequence of Babylonian texts dealing with anatomy (and medicine in general) is head-to-foot, but in this particular case, the taxonomy begins with *libbu*, at the top of the anatomical scheme. Second, the illnesses associated with *libbu* could all be classified as having an association with mental as well as physical illness: *hîp libbi* 'depression', *miqtu* 'seizure', *qât ili / ištari*, 'hand of a god / goddess', and *bennu* and *bêl ūri*

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<sup>13</sup> See Gäbel, *Aetius*, 157-158, and see Thumiger, *Phrenitis*, 65, pointing out that the 3rd century BCE Erasistratos was among the earliest medical writers to identify *phrenitis* as cranial in origin, associated with disturbed reasoning. The idea that Erasistratos' view of the brain was based upon Herophilus' study of the human nervous system (based on dissection) is a non-sequitur. In fact, it is not easy to explain the shift in meaning of *phren* from diaphragm to brain, but what is clear is the tendency to redefine concepts without altering traditional vocabulary or terminology.

<sup>14</sup> See M. J. Geller, *Melothesia in Babylonia* (de Gruyter, 2014), 3-4, and see Zisa p. 164, with bibliography.

(lit. 'lord of the roof'), both terms for 'epilepsy'. The first of these, *hīp libbi* (lit. 'heart-break') is obvious as a mental condition, and the accompanying references to stroke or seizure and epilepsy are both dramatic forms of illness which create a frightening impression on anyone observing the occurrence (hence the Hippocratic label as the 'sacred disease'). The references to 'hand' of a god or goddess is more obscure, but in this case may simply allude to the patient's private fears of disease as divine punishment. This text, dating from the Persian period and roughly contemporary with Hippocrates, may represent a somewhat eccentric and even radical view of human anatomy not typical of the rest of Babylonian medicine, but it expressed an idea which coincided with Erasistratus about the 'mind' being at the anatomical head rather than midriff, although this idea took a very long time before gaining traction.

The only other reference to *libbu* in the 'Taxonomy of Uruk' was to ŠÀ.ZI.GA (*nīš libbi*), associated specifically with the kidneys and lower regions of the body (e.g. rectal disease, barrenness, flatulence). The question is whether this expression might refer euphemistically to the penis (like the word 'knee', which serves a similar function), or to a condition associated with the erect or soft penis, such as priapism or impotence. In either case, this is the point at which Giola Zisa takes up his arguments regarding *nīš libbi*, based upon philology as well as extensive surveys of anthropological theory. Turning first to philology, Zisa takes issue with Robert Biggs in his classic edition of ŠÀ.ZI.GA texts, who makes the obvious point that the term ŠÀ.ZI.GA / *nīš libbi* refers to having an erection, since it refers exclusively to male clients, nor were women ever addressed in the incantations.<sup>15</sup> Zisa (p. 468) argues, however, that one ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantation refers to both men and women,

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<sup>15</sup> See Biggs *Potency Incantations*, 2 and Zisa pp. 42f.

[*ana*] *libbi zikari u sinništi šupšuri* [...], 'to release the 'heart' of a man or woman', also citing an incantation rubric in the Assyrian Medical Catalogue<sup>16</sup> which reads, [KA.INIM.MA ŠA.ZI.GA]A ù MUNUS.GIN.NA ŠA.ZI.GA MUNUS.A.KÁM, [recited spell of ŠA.ZI.GA and 'seducing a woman'<sup>17</sup>, ŠA.ZI.GA of a woman'. This last phrase is jarring, since the previous entry in the medical catalogue is clearly taken from a male perspective: DIŠ NA *ana* MUNUS BAR-ti ŠÀ-šú ÍL-šú-*ma ana* MUNUS-šú ŠÀ-šú NU ÍL-šú, 'if a man can "raise his heart" for a strange woman but cannot "raise his heart" for his own woman (i.e. wife).' In this light, the previous phrase ŠA.ZI.GA MUNUS.A.KÁM might simply mean, 'raising the heart in reference to a woman', referring to potency when encountering a woman,<sup>18</sup> rather than 'arousing a woman's sexual desire', as translated by Steinert.<sup>19</sup> It is not a foregone conclusion that this clause refers to female sexual desire, as interpreted by both Steinert and Zisa.

The argument in favour of female as well as male sexuality within ŠA.ZI.GA takes another turn within ritual instructions, which repeatedly offer the following advice: 'its procedure, pound magnetite and iron, mix (them) in oil of a stone vessel, you recite an

<sup>16</sup> U. Steinert (ed.), *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholarly Text Catalogues* (BAM 9, Boston: de Gruyter), 2018, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Within the Sumerian logogram MUNUS GIN.NA, the verb GIN.NA can represent a G-stem of *alāku*, as in ŠÀ.ZI.GA prescriptions: DIŠ NA *a-na* MUNUS *a-la-ka mu-ut-tú*, 'if a man is 'reduced' (in capacity) for going to a woman' (Zisa p. 235). See also the gloss on MUNUS.GIN.NA as *sinništu ana alāku*, lit. 'a woman -- to go' (BRM 4 20: 50, Geller, *Melothesia* 32, noted by Zisa p. 178); the Akkadian gloss, however, is not a translation of the Sumerian logogram but simply identifies the underlying expression. This does not rule out reading GIN.NA as corresponding to Akk. *šūluku*, 'to make (s.o.) go', or in this idiomatic sense referring to a woman to have sex, similar to the English slang expression, 'to make (her) go all the way'. Similarly, it is possible to translate one unusual ŠÀ.ZI.GA clause (*ina* ŠÀ-*ka šá* MUNUS GIN-*k[u]*) as: 'in your "heart" which makes a woman go', i.e. seduces a woman (see Zisa's note p. 351). One compilation of incantations and recipes relevant to ŠÀ.ZI.GA also includes the opposite case, namely *šum<sub>4</sub>-ma* MUNUS NU GIN-*ku*, 'if a woman is not made to go', see Biggs *Potency Incantations* 70 (KAR 61). [This text, included as an appendix to his edition of ŠÀ.ZI.GA, was not re-edited by Zisa but contains useful information.] See also M. J. Geller, 'Discourse or intercourse revisited', NABU 2005 / 4, No. 81, and Ann Guinan, 'The Female Gaze', in K. De Graef, A. Garcia-Ventura, A. Goddeeris, B. Alpert Nakhai (eds.), *The Mummy under the Bed, Essays on Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East* (Münster, Zaphon, 2022), 59-60, listing sex omens from the series Šumma ālu in which the man 'goes' to the woman (for sex), but the reverse is never mentioned.

<sup>18</sup> In contrast to another reason for having an erection, e.g. nocturnal dreams or homosexual congress. See Zisa p. 178, citing a late Uruk melothesia text which lists KI.ĀG.ĀG NITA *ana* MUNUS, 'love of a man for a woman', KI.ĀG.ĀG NITA *ana* NITA, 'love of a man for a man,' in addition to MUNUS GIN.NA, 'seducing a woman'. See Geller, *Melothesia*, 28ff.

<sup>19</sup> Steinert (ed.), BAM 9, 217, l. 106.



incantation three times over it; you keep anointing the man's penis (and) the woman's vulva and (the result is) ŠA.ZI.GA.<sup>20</sup> Zisa concludes that 'the aim of this therapeutic practice is the reinstatement of the sexual attraction between man and woman' (Zisa p. 43). However, this conclusion is hardly borne out by the remainder of the text, since the role of the woman throughout ŠA.ZI.GA was to entice and encourage the sexuality of the male client, and anointing both his and her genitals was a convenient way of enhancing pleasurable sex between the actors. The sexual desire of the female participant was only useful if relevant for the eventual satisfaction of the male subject. An incantation within the same context adds a somewhat surprising remark following an instruction to recite an incantation three times, that 'a man and woman together will *raise* them but cannot relax.'<sup>21</sup> The obvious literal translation (without overly interpreting the text) is that the man and woman are both 'raising (< *našû*) them' (their sexual organs?) for the act of sex but cannot complete the activity,<sup>22</sup> and hence a special *namburbî* ritual,<sup>23</sup> was required to help alleviate the problem.<sup>23</sup> The statement is not intended to reflect upon the state of desire of both parties, but whether the mutual sex act managed to achieve the desired result of solving the ŠÀ.ZI.GA problem, still essentially targeted at the male client.

One additional philological argument rests upon the ŠÀ.ZI.GA technical term *tibûtu*, 'rising' in connection with *libbu*, also interpreted by Zisa as 'desire', although this expression is essentially only a synonym for *nîš libbi*. One ŠÀ.ZI.GA prescription associates this term clearly with the male client: 'Ditto, for the rising (*tebî*) of the male "heart" in order for him

<sup>20</sup> Zisa p. 282, *šá* NITA GÌŠ-šú *šá* MUNUS GAL<sub>4</sub>.LA-šá EŠ.MEŠ-*ma* ŠA.ZI.GA.

<sup>21</sup> Zisa p. 283, NITA *u* MUNUS TÉŠ.BI *i-na-aš-ši-šú-nu-ti-ma ul i-nu-uh-hu*, translated by Zisa in a highly interpretive way as 'the man and the woman desire together each other (but) they do not find relief' (p. 289, also p. 43).

<sup>22</sup> Akk. *náhu* in the G-stem is normally intransitive, cf. another phrase in the corpus (Zisa p. 394, also 51), *mu-ši U<sub>4</sub> ŠÀ-ka il i-na-ha u ši-i*, 'day and night your "heart" does not tire and she' (text breaks off).

<sup>23</sup> The *Namburbî* ritual was normally used to counter a bad omen, which suggests that the failure to 'find rest' was ominous but not a failure in sexual terms.

to seduce a woman'.<sup>24</sup> The 'ditto' in this prescription refers back to an earlier incipit in the passage, 'to loosen the "heart" of the man and woman',<sup>25</sup> which in this case may refer to a mental rather than physical state, but still in reference to the male client and his problem. The same term appears again (ZISA p. 52) in reference to both a man and woman elsewhere in the corpus, in successive recipes with similar incipits. The first reads, 'for a man to be endowed with a "rising" (*tibûtu*)',<sup>26</sup> followed by a recipe employing copulating lizards, while the next prescription only has part of the incipit preserved, but restored as 'for a woman to [...] a "rising"'.<sup>27</sup> The question is whether the second clause, even as restored, might actually mean, 'for a woman to *cause* a rising' (i.e. in a male client). The Assur Medical Catalogue repeats this same phrase, but only in reference to the man, '[for a] man to be endowed with a "rising" (*tibûtu*)'.<sup>28</sup> So far, the philological evidence fails to make a convincing case for female sexuality as one of the primary interests of this corpus.

Nevertheless, Zisa adheres to his argument that ŠÀ.ZI.GA is not simply a remedy for a male client's failure to achieve an erection but the incantations apply more broadly to female sexual arousal as well -- in fact referencing sexual arousal in both male and female sexual partners. In order to reinforce his argument, Zisa turns to anthropological theory, in a rational and reasonable martialling of comparative evidence from other societies and other social environments. In order to perceive ŠÀ.ZI.GA in a more gender-balanced perspective, Zisa entertains (and then rejects) the notion of 'couples therapy' as a possible way of understanding the incantations and rituals in this complex corpus. The suggestion is

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<sup>24</sup>Zisa p. 466, 468, also 51: DIŠ KI.MIN *a-na lib-bi* NITA ZI-*bi a-na* MUNUS [GIN-šú].

<sup>25</sup>Zisa p. 466 etc., [*a-na*] ŠÀ NITA ù MUNUS *šu-up-šu-ri*, see also Biggs *Potency* 8.

<sup>26</sup>Zisa p. 285, 290, also 52, *ana* NITA ZI-*tas šu-rši-i*. The Š-stem of *rašû* is causative, and Zisa translates accordingly, 'in order to make a man have a an "elevation".'

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. restored as *ana* MUNUS ZI-*tas [šur-ši-i]*, translation Zisa, '[in order] to make a woman have an "elevation".'

<sup>28</sup>[*ana NI*]TA ZI-*tas š[ur-ši-i]*, cf. Steinert (ed.), BAM 9, 217.

based upon various passages within ŠÀ.ZI.GA suggesting female participation in the rituals as an equal partner, such as in the following cases: one pounds magnetite (<sup>na4</sup>KA.GI.NA), mixes it with oil in a stone vessel (as in other ritual instructions), recites an incantation over it, after which: LI.DUR-*su* TAG-*at*, 'you apply to (lit. touch) his navel' (Zisa p. 258-9). The next instruction is similar (see Zisa p. 259), this time with iron powder treated in the same way,<sup>29</sup> with the appropriate incantation recited over the mixture, after which LI.DUR MUNUS TAG-*at* NITA *u* MUNUS TÉŠ.BI [*i-nu-uh-hu*], 'you apply it to the woman's navel. The man and women will [come to rest] together.'<sup>30</sup> As Zisa concludes (p. 79), 'the recipient of therapeutic practice is not only the male partner but also the woman.' However, the idea of Akkadian *nāhu* meaning to find 'sexual satisfaction' or sexual release is stretching the semantics of a verb which essentially means to come to rest or stop an activity, but drawing upon modern theory is a way of shoring up this idea. One such solution derives from the 'socio-therapy' theory of Alessandro Lupo, which explains that the sexual bond between a man and woman represents a split in social structures which must be repaired by therapy for both the man and woman, which is cited to explain the presence of the woman partner in these ritual procedures.<sup>31</sup> This kind of approach is also used to interpret other ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations which call for 'releasing' both the man and woman ...': [*ana*] ŠÀ NITA ù MUNUS *šu-up-šu-ri* [...], 'to cause to release the 'heart' of the man and woman' (Zisa p. 466). The important things to notice about this statement is that *nīš libbi* is not mentioned (hence, no 'sexual desire'), and the fact that the term *šupšuru* (< *pašāru*) usually refers to dispelling

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<sup>29</sup> As Zisa correctly notes (p. ix), magnetite will attract iron particles.

<sup>30</sup> Zisa p. 263 translates 'will find relief together', and Biggs *Potency Incantations 23* translates interpretively as 'the man and the woman will find satisfaction together'. However, the basic uncomplicated meaning of *libbu nāhu* can be seen already in an Old Babylonian letter, which simply states, *li-ba-ni li-nu-úh*, 'let our minds be at ease', see A. R. George, CUSAS 36, 55.

<sup>31</sup> See A. Lupo, "Malattia ed efficacia terapeutica", in Donatella Cozzi (ed.), *Le parole dell'antropologia medica. Piccolo dizionario*. Perugia: Morlacchi, 2012, 134, and see Zisa p. 81.

witchcraft,<sup>32</sup> the perceived cause of the ŠÀ.ZI.GA problem, and in principle witchcraft could adversely affect both the male and female sexual partners, without reflecting the meaning of ŠÀ.ZI.GA itself. Moreover, the woman sex partner is referred to in one ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantation as 'releaser' (*pāširat*, see Zisa pp. 142, 346-347). In other words, major questions remain regarding the woman's actions in these therapeutic 'rituals', in terms of whether these are intended for her own benefit or for that of the male client.

Zisa addresses this issue directly (Zisa pp. 82-84) by pointing out that there are actually three agents at work, namely the *āšipu*-exorcist, the male client, and the female partner. As correctly noted, there are two distinct terms for reciting in these texts, namely *manû* 'to recite', usually referring to the practitioner's role in the reciting an appropriate incantation, and *qabû*, 'to speak', which probably indicate the client's own recitation of a spell. The woman, however, was probably responsible for reciting the lurid and even lewd incantations which are typical of ŠÀ.ZI.GA, although her role is not specified in the ritual choreography.<sup>33</sup> There is an additional question regarding the actual performance of the ritual acts, many of which involve massage and rubbing the client with magnetite and iron in oil, carried out by the *āšipu*-exorcist or attending therapist (Zisa p. 84). However, the unique nature of the ŠÀ.ZI.GA rituals is significant, since an entire series of rituals and incantations, known as *Muššu'u*,<sup>34</sup> were devoted to massage as therapy, but not only are these very different from the genital-orientated rituals in this corpus, but ŠÀ.ZI.GA is never alluded to in *Muššu'u* as belonging to a similar genre. The role of the therapist towards the

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<sup>32</sup> See for convenience CAD P 243.

<sup>33</sup> Zisa (p. 82) lists the many incantations recited by the woman participant, indicated by her expressed wish that the client have sex with her.

<sup>34</sup> See B. Böck, *Das Handbuch Muššu'u "Einreibung". Eine Serie sumerischer und akkadischer Beschwörungen aus dem 1. Jt. vor Chr.* (Biblioteca del Próximo Oriente Antiguo 3, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), 2007.

male client accompanied by a female participant hardly resembles other forms of medical or magical treatments but had its own distinct character.

The ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations are unique within the vast repertoire of Mesopotamian magic, since many involve animal metaphors which compare the client to a wild sexually aroused animal, and although no rationale is provided within ŠÀ.ZI.GA for this repeated motif, it would be logical to assume that these incantations were intended to arouse the libido of the male client, almost as a quaint form of pornography.<sup>35</sup> The animal metaphors, however, also reflect anthropological theory, based on such eminent authors as Foucault, Butler, Leach, Descola, Brandes, and many others (Zisa p. 97). Animal behaviours, according to a simple distillation of modern theory, represent natural models which can be compared and contrasted with human social norms, leading to the conclusion that 'Mesopotamian man symbolically turns into an animal of the steppe, by which the untamed character of sexuality is underlined' (Zisa p. 98). Accordingly, ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantations address the client with wild animal metaphors, such as (translation Zisa, p. 263)

Incantation: Roar on me! Roar on me! Rear up! [Rear up]!  
Roar on me like a stag! Rear up like [a wild bull]!  
Together with you, may a lion rear up!  
Together with you, may a wolf rear up!  
Together with you, may a snake rear up!  
All the muscles of your limbs, your sperm . . .

Apart from the fact that the female partner appears to be reciting this spell, the 'natural' aspects of these metaphors certainly depict untamed sexuality, but in this case in conjunction with a woman partner, whether the client's wife or another unspecified

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<sup>35</sup> See Zisa p. 10, citing Biggs' assumption that the recitations, together with massage, were intended to arouse the client, which Zisa later rejects (p. 13) as an oversimplification based on a biomedical explanation (i.e. an erect penis) without taking into account anthropological arguments of 'health' and 'malady' as cultural norms with psychological as well as pathological factors.

woman.<sup>36</sup> There are no social norms or ethical issues to be found in these incantations, but practical applications of psychology to treat impaired sexual performance. The question remains whether the female participant shared in this objective.

Animal imagery -- oriented towards the sexual prowess of male beasts -- is not the only metaphor in ŠÀ.ZI.GA for sexuality of some kind. Another trope of interest is the bow and arrow motif (Zisa p. 195-196), which appears in ritual instructions for making a bow from animal tendons used with an arrow, the point of which is illustrated in a ŠÀ.ZI.GA incantation, 'May the quiver not be *empty*! may the bow not be slack! (*a-a i-[ri-qa iš]-pa-tu<sub>4</sub> a-a ir-ma-a* <sup>giš</sup>BAN, see Zisa, p. 377). If there is any doubt about the male frame of reference to this metaphor, this should be dispelled by similar references in the Babylonian Talmud, equating male sexual potency with shooting an arrow. The context is a passage in which a married couple blames each other for being sterile, but the Talmud concludes with a concise ruling, *hy' qyym' lh bywrh khš hw' l' qym lyh bywrh khš*, 'she is in a position to know if he shoots like an arrow, but he cannot be in a position to know if he shoots like an arrow' (Yebamot 65a). The supposition was that 'shooting like an arrow' was a necessary prerequisite for insemination, based on notions of male potency.

There is another issue which lurks in the background. Witchcraft was specifically identified in the corpus as causing dysfunction related to ŠÀ.ZI.GA, which raises the question whether therapy applied to sexuality should be considered as belonging primarily to either medicine or magic. Combating witchcraft combined aspects of both medicine and magic,<sup>37</sup> involving therapeutic recipes as well as

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<sup>36</sup> It may be worth recalling that Namburbî rituals occasionally call for the client to have sex with a strange woman, in order to escape from a bad omen by adopting another persona. See S. M. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung. Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi)* (Baghdader Forschungen 18, Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern), 1994, 285.

<sup>37</sup> While medical recipes often prescribed the use of amulets, the more typical method of countering was through magical binding of the anonymous offending witch (see Zisa pp. 113-117). The methodology persisted

incantations and rituals. Witchcraft was an elusive concept which co-existed with other types of presumed causes of illness, including vengeful gods, feared demons, and contamination through contact with impurities. The difference is that witchcraft, at least in its first millennium gestalt, represented illness and misfortune usually generated by human agency rather than gods or demons.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not mean that magic and medicine coalesce into a single concept of 'therapy', as advocated by Eleonor Robson.<sup>39</sup> There are compelling reasons to demarcate medicine and magic, especially in texts which rely upon both. Ancient scholars, first of all, unambiguously labelled magical and medical literature (*āšipūtu* and *asūtu*), both of which were represented by their own particular professions, the *āšipu*-exorcist and *asû*-physician and apothecary. Without reviewing the history of these two genres in earlier periods, the first millennium provides ample evidence of the division between these two types of healing arts. First, the physical appearance of the tablets indicates unmistakable distinctions between the genres, since anyone working with Nineveh Library sources can tell the difference at twenty paces between a tablet of magical incantations and a tablet of medical prescriptions. Second, the fact that magic and medicine belonged to two separate professions is often misunderstood, since the important question is not who uses a text, but who composed it. A chemist may well consult or even use a physics textbook, but he is

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into late antique magic as well, as can be seen from the many images of the bound Lilith in Aramaic incantation bowls.

<sup>38</sup> Attributing ŠÀ.ZI.GA to witchcraft and especially to female witches (see Zisa p. 110) makes good sense against the background of impotence or reduced libido as a reflection of a dysfunctional family, which could have been implicitly understood within an appropriate cultural context without having to be spelled out.

<sup>39</sup> E. Robson, "Mesopotamian Medicine and Religion: Current Debates, New Perspectives", *Religion Compass* 2, 4 (2008), 476, see Zisa p. 33. The terms 'magic' and 'medicine' reflect our modern categories, just like 'astronomy' and 'astrology', but this does not mean that ancients failed to recognise the differences between the two. Ancients did not need to clarify these distinctions, since they understood them implicitly. There are indeed overlaps between *āšipūtu* and *asūtu*, 'magical' and 'medical' therapies, as in other systems of knowledge, e.g. between chemistry and physics, but we do not amalgamate these modern disciplines. The fact that *āšipūtu* and *asūtu* have different aims and methods but with some shared procedures and suppositions is perfectly understandable.

unlikely to be able to write it. The recent publication of Assyrian tablet catalogues of medical and magical literatures indicates that these were two separate *disciplines*, which anyone could use for their own purposes, but the texts remain integral components of their respective branches of healing arts. Practices dedicated to treating specific physical and psychological illnesses could effectively employ strategies from both disciplines, *āšipūtu* and *asūtu*, without crossing or obscuring any epistemological boundaries.

The specific question, however, in regard to ŠÀ.ZI.GA is whether these texts were equally devoted to treating sexual dysfunction in both male and female clients. Zisa has put much stock in references to ritual actions also involving the female body, such as anointing the woman's vulva or pelvis, or applying ointment to the woman's navel as well as the man's, or to the woman's left hand as well as the man's right hand, or to the woman's throat as well as to the man's throat (Zisa pp. 181-182). All of this accords well with modern theories of 'knowledge and power' in sexual relations (Foucault)<sup>40</sup> or gender identity (Butler),<sup>41</sup> as well as ritual acts being performative (Austin),<sup>42</sup> etc., but none of these acts towards women appears to alter the basic male-orientation of ŠÀ.ZI.GA, even on the level in which these texts were intended to influence human psychology as well as physiology.

This brings us back to common sense anatomy. The crucial question is how an *āšipu*-exorcist or *asû*-physician would have known about a woman's sexuality. For such intimate knowledge, they would have required women informants, which could also suggest private encounters between a therapist and female client, or perhaps a group therapy session between a practitioner and women clients. While this kind of scenario might be possible in

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<sup>40</sup> M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1: *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

<sup>41</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. London, New York: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>42</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.



a more modern setting, the likelihood of anything similar taking place in Mesopotamia is remote. Mesopotamian diagnostic texts as well as therapeutic medical texts generally dealt with the male body as the primary object, with the female body only mentioned in reference to childbirth and gynaecology, or in physiognomic omens relating to women. Knowledge of female anatomy was rudimentary at best, with little understanding of or interest in female sensitivities during an intimate encounter such as sex; there was no Mesopotamian Kama Sutra. Moreover, any visits to the house of an ill client -- usually in an acute state of illness -- was unlikely to have been a private audience but was more likely to have been attended by all members of the family being present; many anthropological parallels could be adduced. Finally, with all of the incantations and rituals of ŠÀ.ZI.GA taken into account, one is left with the overall impression that everything within this corpus was dedicated to treating male sexual dysfunction and even performance anxieties, since rubbing ointments on the woman's pelvis, hands, or throat was likely to have been considered as an erotic stimulus to a male client being present.<sup>43</sup> Frequent references to massaging the male organ cannot simply be discounted in the face of modern theory, which attempts to redefine male and female sexuality in more equal terms, to include queer, gender and even cyborg theory (see Zisa pp. 18-19, 96). In essence, this brings the discussion back to the opening discussion in Zisa's text, regarding whether *nīš libbi* can refer to erectile dysfunction, as argued repeatedly by R. Biggs but rejected by Zisa (see pp. 10, 45-46). The counterargument rests on the idea that ŠÀ / *libbu* cannot serve as a euphemism for 'penis', since there is no Mesopotamian taboo associated with *nīš libbi* being a term for

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<sup>43</sup> One of the clearest indications of how ŠÀ.ZI.GA was directed towards the male body and ego is reflected in the age factor, since one ideal was for an old man to find a young female partner in order to revitalise his sexuality, but the reverse was not thought to be valid; having sex with an old woman was considered to be a bad omen (see Zisa pp. 134-135).

'erection', and hence no euphemism was required. However, just as *birku* 'knee' was a euphemism for 'penis',<sup>44</sup> it is equally plausible that *libbu*, with its many different meanings, could indicate the 'penis' as well.

The issue at stake is whether modern anthropological theory can or should influence how we interpret Akkadian texts. In this particular case, the question is whether Gioela Zisa is correct in drawing upon anthropology to interpret ŠÀ.ZI.GA as being more gender inclusive than the original inferences drawn by Robert Biggs from 1967. The conclusion reached here is that ŠÀ.ZI.GA texts cannot readily be interpreted on the basis of universal human strategies for dealing with erectile dysfunction, impotence, or even loss of libido, but that the authority of the text must remain within its own cultural milieu, which is primarily oriented towards the requirements of a male client. This is not intended to discredit in any way Giola Zisa's impeccable edition of ŠÀ.ZI.GA, which offers new texts and translations as well as a useful survey of modern theory relevant to questions of human sexuality. The purpose of the present discussion is not to turn the clock back to an earlier understanding of ŠÀ.ZI.GA, but to use the tools provided by Zisa to determine whether and how Mesopotamian texts can be evaluated in the light of modern anthropological theory, even if the ancient data fails to provide us with convenient patterns of comparison. Questions regarding gender and sexuality are certainly legitimate, as long as translations and interpretations of ancient texts are not coloured by anachronistic assumptions.

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<sup>44</sup> See for convenience CAD B, 257.