

THE DONKEY OF ANŠAN: A RHINO IN MESOPOTAMIA?
NOTES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING
IN A BILINGUAL PROVERB

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1. A bilingual proverb about exotic animals

Among the less well-attested collections of proverbs from the Old Babylonian period, one bilingual example stands out as particularly interesting.¹ The collection is preserved on just two tablets, one of which remains unpublished.² The published tablet, N 3395, is a two-column school tablet from Nippur, first edited by Wilfred Lambert,³ and later re-edited more comprehensively by Bendt Alster.⁴ The entire collection contains somewhere in the region of 20 proverbs, though the manuscripts are not exact duplicates, and so it is impossible to be sure of its original extent. The collection as a whole has several interesting features, but here we will consider just a single proverb:

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² This was kindly shared with the writer by Jana Matuszak, who identified it very recently. Although the tablet preserves several new proverbs, it does not give any noteworthy variants for the proverb under discussion, of which only four words are preserved before a break.

³ Lambert 1960, 272 notes that a Kassite date is not impossible for the tablet, but that the text itself is Old Babylonian. This supports van Dijk’s (1998, 12, n. 16) assertion that bilinguals in which the Sumerian is on the left and Akkadian on the right are to be dated to the Kassite period.

⁴ Alster 1997, 288–289. Alster notes that Lambert’s edition was made before the tablet was baked. The text has also been collated by Castellino 1972, 117 and by Civil 1998, 11, n. 5. The edition given here follows that of Alster, apart from reading *dùg* in place of *ĪI* in line 9’. My thanks to Piotr Michalowski for suggesting this reading.

N 3395, obv ⁷ 5.	di-bi-da an-ša ₄ -an ^{ki} -na	<i>i-me-er an-ša-ni-[im]</i>
N 3395, obv ⁷ 6.	d̄im-šáḥ mar-ḥa-ši ^{ki}	<i>ma-ar-gi, pa-ra-aḥ-[še]</i>
N 3395, obv ⁷ 7.	gul-lum me-luḥ-ḥa ^{ki}	<i>šu-ra-an me-luḥ-[ḥa]</i>
N 3395, obv ⁷ 8.	til-lu-ug sa ₁₂ -ti-um ^{ki}	<i>pi-i-ir ša-ad-di-[im]</i>
N 3395, obv ⁷ 9.	^{gis} asal ₂ -dùg ga-raš ^{sar} -gim	<i>ša ša-ar-ba-tam ki-ma karāš[im]</i> (G[A.RAŠ])
N 3395, obv ⁷ 10.	šab-šab-e	<i>i-ḥa-ra-[šu]</i>
	The di-bi-da of Anšan, the bear of Marḥaši, the gul-lum of Meluḥḥa, (and) the til-lu-ug of the East, are the ones which fell strawberry trees ⁵ as though they were leeks	The donkey of Anšan, the <i>margû</i> of Paraḥši, the cat of Meluḥḥa, (and) the elephant of the East, (are the ones) which break down strawberry trees (lit. poplars) like leeks

In each of the first four lines a very rare word – Sumerian in 3 instances, Akkadian in the other – is paired with a relatively common one in the other language: di-bi-da is otherwise attested only in a lexical list;⁶ til-lu-ug only in the royal praise poem Šulgi B;⁷ *margû* only in broken context in what is probably a royal hymn from Old Babylonian Nippur;⁸ and gul-lum is a hapax legomenon. The better attested d̄im-šáḥ is known from a handful of texts, mostly lexical, as a word for bear,⁹ and with the exception of *margû* the Akkadian equivalents are all perfectly commonplace – *imēru*, *šurānu*, and *pīru* are the usual words for donkey, cat, and elephant respectively.

⁵ The translation “Strawberry Tree” may raise some eyebrows. Both the Sumerian ^{gis}asal₂ and the Akkadian *šarbatu* are more or less firmly identified as the Euphrates Poplar (*Populus euphratica*) (see, most recently, Jiménez 2017, 213–217). The crucial point, however, is that in the Sumerian version of our proverb the tree is the ^{gis}asal₂-dùg “sweet Asal-tree.” The translation “Strawberry tree” (*Arbutus andrachne*) is based on a detailed study of the lexical and literary evidence for this tree, and is unfortunately too extensive to be included here. The details will be given in a future paper, provisionally entitled “Seeing the Wood for the Trees.”

⁶ Civil 1971, 179, Izi⁷ “C” iv 35. di-bi-da = *e-me-ru* “d̄ibida = donkey.” This is a Middle Assyrian tablet (VAT 9714; CDLI P282498) provisionally assigned to the acrographic lexical series Izi = *išātu* by Civil, but with the proviso that it is likely a development from the exclusively Old Babylonian series Nig-ga = *makkūru*, and its exact identification is therefore uncertain. As the principle of the list is acrographic, no additional information can be gleaned about the word from context.

⁷ Castellino 1972, 36–37, l. 59. See also the text on ETCSL: <https://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/c24202.htm> (02.05.2021), there l. 58.

⁸ *Contra* CAD M/1: 278, s.v. *margû* A. See Simons forthcoming, §2c. The other attestation of *margû* was published in Peterson and Wassermann 2020, 401–402, l. 9. My thanks to Jeremiah Peterson for alerting me to this reference.

⁹ These are discussed at length in a forthcoming paper: Simons forthcoming, §§2a–b.

2. Making sense of a list of rare words

At first glance, the superabundance of rare words in this proverb is unusual and difficult to understand. On closer inspection, however, the choice of this succession of rare words seems to have been motivated by the assonance and consonance of their constituent parts. The words *gul-lum* and *til-lu-ug* are phonetically related, revolving around /g/ and /l/, while *dī-bi-da* and *dīm-šaḥ* share the almost homophonous initial sounds /dib/ and /dim/, as well as a similar pattern of vowels. The final syllable of *gul-lum* nearly forms a palindrome with the succeeding first syllable of *me-luḥ-ḥa*.¹⁰ *gi^sasal₂-dùg* resonates with all four animal names, sharing /d/ with *dī-bi-da* and *dīm-šaḥ*, and /l/ and /ug/ with *gul-lum* and *til-lu-ug*, as well as leading into *ga-raš^{sar}-gim*. Similarly, the juxtaposition of *dīm-šáḥ*, *mar-ḥa-ši*, *margī* and *paraḥše* emphasises the repetition of the consonants /m/, /š/, /ḥ/ and /r/. It seems likely that this influenced the use of the word *margû* as the equivalent to Sumerian *dīm-šaḥ*, which is otherwise only equated with *dabû* “bear.” The same consonants are also notable in the other Akkadian animal names, *imēr*, *šurān*, and *pīr*. The beginning of the simile, *ša šarbatam*, chimes with all four animal names, reflecting the /š/, /r/, and /m/, and introducing a bilabial /b/ (reflecting the /p/ of *pīr* and *paraḥše*), as well as having a similar vocalic pattern to both *anšanim* and *paraḥše*. This vocalic pattern also leads into the final words of the Akkadian version *kīma karāšim iḥarašû*, in which /š/, /r/, /m/, and /ḥ/ are again prevalent, and the entire closing simile is bookended by the /s/ of *ša šarbatam* and *iḥarašû*. On a graphic level, the sign DÌM is composed of the signs GAL and LUGAL which, were they to be pronounced aloud, would resound with *gul-lum* and *til-lu-ug*. Many more such observations could be made, but this gives an indication of the intricacy of these six lines.

Given the fact that the rare words explicitly refer to foreign animals, it seems wholly plausible that they are not in fact Sumerian or Akkadian *per se*, but rather foreign names of, and for, foreign animals. This is almost certainly the case for *margû*, which the CAD understands as a loanword,¹¹ presumably on the basis that an Akkadian etymology would give either a deverbal noun from *ruggû* “to wrong, to make illegitimate claims”¹² + *ma-*, or a quadriliteral root **mrg[?]*. The syllabic spelling of the three rare words in the Sumerian version of the proverb equally points towards them also being loanwords from foreign languages. It is

¹⁰ It is possible that both *dī-bi-da an-ša₄-an^{ki}-na* and *gul-lum me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}* are sandhi spellings, which is to say that the animal name and the place name have been rolled into one – *dībidanšan* and *gullummeluḥḥa* respectively. It is not possible to be certain, however, as both *dībida* and *gullum* are so rarely attested that we do not know their normal forms.

¹¹ CAD M/1: 278, s.v. *margû* A.

¹² CAD R: 404, s.v. *ruggû*.

possible that the words were drawn from the languages of the lands with which they are associated. The language of Marḥaši (probably the Jiroft civilisation)¹³ is almost completely unknown,¹⁴ as is the language of Meluḥḥa (the Indus Valley civilisation).¹⁵ Elamite is comparatively well-known, but the present writer can find no plausible candidate in the *Elamisches Wörterbuch* for di-bi-da.¹⁶ It is worth noting that di-m-šáḥ seems to have been borrowed from a Semitic language.¹⁷

3. The Donkey of Anšan: The identities of the rare animals in the proverb

Several suggestions have been made regarding the identification of the animals, usually as brief notes in articles concerned with other topics, and for the most part these are to be accepted. Piotr Steinkeller has proposed understanding the “elephant of the east” as the Indian Elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*).¹⁸ Two species of bear are now native to Iran – the Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos syriacus*), and the Asiatic Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus gedrosianus*).¹⁹ As Piotr Michalowski points out, the “animals named az in the Sumerian language must be identified as the Syrian Brown Bear,”²⁰ and so the “bear of Marḥaši” is perhaps to be identified as an Asiatic Black Bear. This is supported by the fact that the

¹³ On the location of Marḥaši, see Steinkeller 2012, 262; 2014, 691; Potts 2004, 6–7; 2005, 67.

¹⁴ The only published work on the language of Marḥaši is Glassner 2005, 11–14, which is an onomasticon of Marḥašians in Mesopotamian sources. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference.

¹⁵ According to Ambos (2020, 37) just three words – two personal names (Na-na-za and Sa₆-ma-ar), and the name of Meluḥḥa itself – are attested in the cuneiform record as remnants of the language, or more likely languages, of the Indus Valley. The anonymous reviewer suggests the possibility of a connection between gu1-lum and modern Hindi गुल्दर (guldar) “leopard.”

¹⁶ Hinz and Koch 1987. Parsa Daneshmand (pers. comm.) suggests the possibility of a connection between the Elamite word *ti-pi*, possibly to be translated “neck” (Hinz and Koch, 1987, 333: “vielleicht ein Körperteil, etwa Hals”), with -da or -ta understood as an Elamite suffix. The word “neck,” or indeed any body part, is not unlikely in animal names, though there is no *prima facie* reason to suppose that the two words are related. It should also be noted that Hinz and Koch assert that *ti-pi* is attested only in Neo-Elamite texts, though this does not rule out the possibility that the word existed in earlier periods.

It is also possible that di-bi-da is ultimately a loanword from the Indus Valley civilisation. It is perhaps noteworthy in this regard that a Malay word for rhinoceros is *badak*, and that this passed into Portuguese, and later English and Italian as *abada*. I am unable to find any information on the etymology of this word, and it is obviously separated from Sumerian by a vast gulf of both time and space, but assuming the arguments presented below (§4) are accepted, it is conceivable that the same source language underlies both *badak* and *dibida*.

¹⁷ Civil 1998, 12. See further Simons forthcoming, §2a, n. 21.

¹⁸ Steinkeller 1980, 9. Presumably in contrast to the Syrian elephant (*Elephas maximus asurus*) which was still extant during the Old Babylonian period.

¹⁹ Ahmadzadeh et al. 2008, 2379.

²⁰ Michalowski 2013, 305.

modern range of this subspecies of Black Bear encompasses the area of South East Iran that constituted the ancient land of Marḥaši, while that of the Brown Bear does not. If this is accepted, it seems reasonable to assume that *dim-šáḥ* and its usual equivalent *dabû* are to be understood generally as referring to the Black Bear, but this is too deep a question to enter into here.

Miguel Civil has suggested that the “cat” of Meluḥḥa “may be something like a tiger,”²¹ but a rather better suggestion, made by Steinkeller,²² is that it is to be identified with the *ur gùn-a Me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}* “Speckled cat of Meluḥḥa” received by Ibbi-Sin as a gift from Marḥaši.²³ Steinkeller considers this to be a leopard (*Panthera pardus*),²⁴ while Daniel Potts has argued that it could be a cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*).²⁵ Michael Witzel has questioned whether “such a common animal as the leopard” would be sent to the king of Ur.²⁶ It is also worth considering the fact that both the Akkadian word *nimru* and the Sumerian *némur* “leopard” are well-attested, and it is reasonable to assume that the *ur gùn-a Me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}* might have been called *némur* if it were recognisably a leopard.²⁷ Given these objections, Potts’ suggestion that the animal is a cheetah, an animal otherwise unknown in Mesopotamia, is probably to be preferred. In either case, however, the animal in question is a big, relatively ferocious, cat.

This leaves just the “donkey of Anšan.” Civil and Steinkeller have both suggested that this is a Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*).²⁸ This is not impossible, but the last line of the proverb leads us to expect the animals involved to have been powerful or massive enough, at least figuratively, to knock down trees without effort.²⁹ This is difficult to imagine of a camel. Moreover, as Steinkeller has persuasively demonstrated, the Bactrian camel was known in Ur III period Babylonia, thanks to a herd gifted to Šulgi by powerful figures from

²¹ Civil 1998, 11, n. 6.

²² Steinkeller 2009, 417–418, n. 14.

²³ Potts 2002, 346. The animal was perhaps delivered by a man named Banana. Laursen and Steinkeller (2017, 86, n. 31), suggest that the same animal is known from other texts as *ur-maḥ gùn-a* “spotted lion” and *pirig-gùn* “spotted lion/panther.”

²⁴ Steinkeller 1982, 253, n. 61. See now Laursen and Steinkeller 2017, 86, in which an Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) is suggested, though given that this animal’s modern range is restricted to the Arabian peninsula and the Judean desert (Spalton and Hikmani 2006, 4–6), the Indian leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*) or the Persian/Anatolian leopard (*Panthera pardus tulliana*) (Kiabi et al. 2006, 41–43. Note that the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*) is now considered consubspecific with the Anatolian leopard (*P.p. tulliana*) (Kitchener et al. 2017, 74) is more likely (at least insofar as it is possible to be so specific about a single animal 4,000 years ago).

²⁵ Potts 2002, 347–351.

²⁶ Witzel 2003, 35, n. 139.

²⁷ CAD N: 234–235, s.v. *nimru* A. ePSD2, s.v. *nemur*.

²⁸ Civil 1998, 11, n. 6; Steinkeller 2009, 417–418, n. 14.

²⁹ See below (§5) for a more nuanced reading of the proverb, but note that in any reading the great size and power of the animals is implicit.

Šimaški and Anšan.³⁰ This animal is recorded in two administrative texts, and named GÚ.URUxGU.³¹ The reading of the name is uncertain,³² but as Steinkeller notes, “a hypothetical reading /dibid(a)/ finds no support in any data.”³³ It is important to bear in mind that only this one herd of GÚ.URUxGU is attested in the entire cuneiform record, indicating that the animals probably did not survive long enough to make an impact on scribal traditions, and so it is possible that the name was forgotten and replaced by di-bi-da. There is no indication that GÚ.URUxGU made its way into the lexical tradition from which the author of the proverb doubtless drew his inspiration.

Nonetheless, a further reason to reject the hypothesis can be found in one of the two administrative texts mentioning the GÚ.URUxGU camels. AO 19548 is a summary account of the animals which passed through Puzriš Dagan (mod. Drehem) over a 60 month period in the last years of the reign of Šulgi, in which the GÚ.URUxGU appear alongside other animals.³⁴ The account is organised as follows: 1. cattle, 2. red deer, 3. fallow deer, 4. camels, 5. horses, 6. onagers, 7. big donkeys, 8. small donkeys, 9. sheep and goats, 10. gazelle, 11. bears, 12. ḫabum (antelope?), 13. ubi (dolphin?). Wu Yuhong interprets the list as being divided into four groups – large even-toed ungulates (1–4), odd-toed ungulates (5–8), small even-toed ungulates (9–10), carnivorous, and rare animals (11–13).³⁵ This division is not noted on the tablet, and it is unlikely that Ur III scribes thought in modern Linnaean terms, though they might have noted similarities between these animals in a comparable manner. The division cannot be completely upheld as, by any standard, camels must have been thought of as rare animals in Ur III Mesopotamia.

Regardless, the order of the entries is interesting as it does not seem to group camels generically with donkeys. Both horses and onagers intervene between camels and donkeys. It is, of course, possible that the camel was grouped with the horse-animals, as Steinkeller has argued,³⁶ but it seems unlikely that the list

³⁰ Steinkeller 2009, 415–417.

³¹ The keeper of these animals, Šū-Adad, is mentioned in two other texts as the sipad GÚ.URUxGU “Camel herdsman.” (Steinkeller 2009, 415–417).

³² Either ^ggur₅ or gú-gur₅ are most likely, and both Steinkeller (2009, 417) and Wu (2010, 5) have suggested interpretations, but neither is especially convincing. It seems probable that it is a foreign word given that it is a foreign animal known only from this one herd. Steinkeller (2009, 417) suggests it could be an Elamite loanword on the basis that Šimaškians and Anšanites brought the gift, but it is also possible that it is ultimately a loanword from the unknown language of the Oxus civilisation, whence the camels presumably originated.

³³ Steinkeller 2009, 417–418, n. 14.

³⁴ Calvot 1969, 101–103. See also CDLI P127971.

³⁵ Wu 2010, 5.

³⁶ Steinkeller 2009, 416, n. 8.

of horse-animals would start with the rare and exotic one. The placement seems more likely to indicate that the camel was classed either with the deer, or as a sort of deerish-horse. As Wu notes, camels seem to be grouped with cattle and deer rather than horses and donkeys.³⁷

While possible, therefore, the camel does not seem to be the most likely candidate. Another large animal sufficiently like a donkey as to be comparable to people who have never seen one is the Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The rhino is undeniably massive, and while a donkey is not perhaps the first thing that springs to mind as a comparison, scientifically speaking they are fairly closely related, both belonging to the taxonomic order Perissodactyla – odd-toed ungulates. While this is not relevant to the ancient classification of the animals, it does mean that there are physical similarities between the two, as can be seen in the photo below of Manuela the rhinoceros who shares her enclosure in Tblisi zoo with three donkeys.³⁸ Excluding the rhino's horn, size, and saggy skin, the two are not entirely dissimilar in appearance. The ears in particular are comparable, but also the eyes, legs, nostrils, posture, and appearance when grazing. Obviously, the similarities do not stand up to any sort of prolonged scrutiny, but to someone who had never seen a rhino, but had perhaps seen a carving or just heard a story, the donkey is a tolerable equivalent.

³⁷ Wu 2010, 5.

³⁸ After reading an early draft of this paper, my friend Laura Walters sent me a photo from the internet of a rhino standing near some donkeys. On further investigation I found that this photo had been taken in Tblisi zoo, where the female white rhino, Manuela, had become very lonely and aggressive after the death of her mate (the fact that she had killed him herself notwithstanding). The zoo authorities, unable to secure another rhino, started housing her with other animals to try to cheer her up. They began with zebras, but these simply returned Manuela's aggression. Next they tried goats, but they were too skittish – keeping as far from the rhinoceros as possible. Finally, they tried donkeys, and these were a roaring success, to the extent that Manuela now protects the youngest donkey whenever somebody enters their enclosure.

While donkeys and rhinos are clearly quite different animals, I was surprised to find from the photos of Manuela and her donkey friends that there are certain similarities in appearance when looked at side by side. My thanks are due to Laura Walters, Otari Gabunia, and Khatia Basilashvili, a research scientist at Tblisi zoo, for sending me these photos.



Fig. 1: Manuela the rhinoceros and one of the donkeys with which she shares an enclosure in Tblisi zoo, Georgia. Photo credit: Khatia Basilashvili.

To be clear, it is not my position that a rhino was ever mistaken for a donkey. Rather, it seems possible that if forced to describe a rhino to someone who had never seen one “massive, grey donkeyish thing with a horn, lives in the east somewhere” would not be an unreasonable attempt. That such a description could be shortened to simply “donkey of Anšan” is not unlikely.

Indeed, classical authors did more or less precisely this. The rhinoceros is attested in several classical texts,³⁹ three of which show a very similar line of thought to that suggested here: Pseudo-Oppian, in the *Cynegetica*: “The Rhinoceros is not much larger than the bounding Oryx. A little above the tip of the nose rises a horn dread and sharp, a cruel sword.”⁴⁰ Book 3 of the late antique magical collection, the *Cyranides*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistos: “The Rhinoceros is a quadruped animal resembling a deer, with a single enormous horn in place of the nose.”⁴¹ Strabo, in Book XVI of the *Geography*:

³⁹ Conveniently assembled in Gowers 1950, though note he does not include the references in Pseudo-Oppian or the *Cyranides*.

⁴⁰ Mair 1928, 103, ll. 551–553. See also Renker 2021, 106–107, ll. 551–553.

⁴¹ Panaino 2001, 156.

... the rhinoceros, is but little short of the elephant in size, not, as Artemidorus says, “in length to the tail” (although he says that he saw the animal at Alexandria), but falls short, I might almost say, only about [...] in height, judging at least from the one I saw; nor does their colour resemble that of box-wood, but rather that of the elephant; and it is of the size of a bull; and its shape is most nearly like that of the wild boar, particularly in its foreparts, except its nose, which has a snub horn harder than any bone; and it uses its horn as a weapon, just as the wild boar uses its tusks.

(Strab. *Geogr.* 16.4.15; trans. Jones 1930)

The same can be found in the many Arabic accounts of the Indian rhinoceros. These have been discussed at length by Richard Ettinghausen, so we will mention only two here.⁴² The anonymous author of the first book of the *Akhbār al-Šīn wa-l-Hind* “Accounts of China and India,” dating to AD 851–852, wrote that the rhino “has a single horn on the front of its forehead ... [it] is, by nature, smaller than the elephant but tends to be the same dark colour as the elephant. It resembles the buffalo and is so strong that no other animal equals it in strength.”⁴³ Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, in his account of a mission to the Volga Bulgars in AD 921 describes the rhino as “an animal smaller than a camel but larger than a bull ... It has the head of a camel, the tail and hooves of a bull, and the body of a mule. It has a single, round, thick horn in the middle of its head.”⁴⁴

All of these texts, naturally enough, describe the entirely foreign rhinoceros by reference to more familiar animals. In the case of Strabo, who claims to have seen a rhino in person, he describes it as basically like a boar, but the size of a bull, the colour of an elephant, and with a horn on its nose. Pseudo-Oppian similarly notes the horn on the nose, but confusingly states that the animal is the size of an oryx.⁴⁵ In the *Cyranides*, the horn replaces the nose entirely, while the animal resembles a deer. In the Arabic texts the horn has migrated to the middle of the head. To the *Akhbār al-Šīn wa-l-Hind* the animal resembles an elephant-coloured buffalo, while to ibn Faḍlān it is a hybrid of camel, bull and mule. The important point for our purposes is that the sort of vague description we envisage for the “Donkey of Anšan” is precisely what is seen in the classical and Arabic

⁴² Ettinghausen 1950, *passim*, esp. 12–25.

⁴³ Mackintosh-Smith 2017, 14, §1.7.6.

⁴⁴ Montgomery 2017, 30, §70.

⁴⁵ Renker 2021, 194, n. 552 notes that the oryx here could be either a Greek name for a breed of horse, or the Arabian or Beisa Oryx. In either case the animal is much smaller than a rhino. The Arabian/Beisa oryx has horns, which could be the grounds for comparison (see below, n. 74), but a comparison to a horse should not be ruled out, as seen in the rhinoceros description in the *Bāburnama* (see below, and n. 48). An equine comparison also chimes neatly with the argument presented here that the “donkey of Anshan” should be understood as a rhinoceros.

texts – the rhino is a “bull-sized boar with a horn” to Strabo, an “oryx-sized animal with a big sharp horn” to Pseudo-Oppian, a “deer-type animal with a horn for a nose” to the *Cyranides*, “a strong buffalo-type animal with a horn on its head” to the *Akhbār al-Šīn wa-l-Hind*, and “a camel-headed, bull-hoofed mule with a horn” to Ibn Faḍlān.⁴⁶

Ibn Faḍlān’s description is particularly pertinent in that it includes the mule among creatures comparable to the rhino. This is echoed, and amplified, in the *Bāburnāma*, the memoirs of the first Mughal emperor, Bābur, written in Chaghatai Turkic at the beginning of the 16th century AD. Bābur, who had seen many rhinoceroses personally, described the rhino as “the size of three oxen ... It has one horn in the middle of its snout ... It resembles a horse more than it does any other animal. As a horse does not have a large belly, neither does the rhinoceros; as a horse has solid bone in its pastern, so does the rhinoceros; as a horse has a hoof, so does the rhinoceros.”⁴⁷ Bābur’s description could reasonably be shortened to “big horse with a horn.” Of course, this has no direct relevance to a proverb from over 3,500 years earlier, but it does demonstrate that an equine analogy, such as “donkey of Anshan” is a plausible way to describe a rhinoceros.⁴⁸

4. Mesopotamian rhinoceroses

i. Iconographic evidence

The major objection to the proposal that the “Donkey of Anšan” was a rhinoceros is that the rhinoceros was not a native inhabitant of the ancient Near East in historical times.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, there is iconographic evidence, in the form of

⁴⁶ Compare also the ancient Chinese poet Guo Pu’s description of a *xi*-rhinoceros in his third century BC commentary on the lexical text *Erya*, in which the *xi* – likely a Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) based on the description – is said to resemble “a water buffalo with a pig’s head and with elephant’s feet, each foot cleft in three. It has a large belly with three horns on its nose, forehead, and on top, respectively. The smallest horn, which is on its nose, does not fall off and is used to facilitate eating.” (Strassberg 2002, 93). For more early Chinese descriptions of the rhinoceros, see Lefevure 1990–1991, 131–138.

⁴⁷ Thackston 2002, 336, §275b.

⁴⁸ In fact, this type of analogy is relatively frequent in descriptions of the rhinoceros. Apart from those discussed here (Ibn Faḍlān, the *Bāburnāma*, and perhaps Pseudo-Oppian (see n. 45)), several further examples of the rhinoceros being compared to a horse can be found in Arabic, Persian, and Mughal texts: see Ettinghausen 1950, 16–17.

⁴⁹ To the present writer’s knowledge, there have been three earlier suggestions of rhinoceroses in Mesopotamian texts (excluding the discussion around the Black Obelisk, for which see below). The earliest was Schrader’s suggestion that *kurkizannu*, now known to mean “piglet,” should be understood as “rhinoceros” on etymological grounds, connecting it to Arabic *karkadann* “rhinoceros,” and various cognates in other languages, ultimately deriving from Sanskrit *khaḍgā* “rhinoceros” (1873, 708). Schrader himself cast doubt on his suggestion the following year (1874, 152), but his argument was reaffirmed twelve years later by Jensen (1886, 311). Schrader’s suggestion was adopted by Delitzsch (1874, 56), Muss-Arnolt (1905, 437), Zimmern (1915, 51), and Bezold (1926,

two cylinder seals, that the rhino was known in Mesopotamia, at least in the mid- to late third millennium. A glazed steatite seal excavated at Ešnunna (mod. Tell Asmar) has a clear representation of a rhinoceros, alongside an elephant and a gharial:⁵⁰



Fig. 2: Oriental Institute Chicago, N.11517a. Akkadian period cylinder seal found at Ešnunna.⁵¹

The object dates to the late Akkadian period.⁵² It has been argued variously that it is an original Indus seal,⁵³ an Elamite interpretation of an Indus seal,⁵⁴ a copy

149) before being finally disproven in print by Meissner (1932, 40). In fact, the correct reading was established slightly earlier, possibly by Thureau-Dangin (Benveniste 1929, 375, n. 1). The suggested etymological connection between *kurkizannu* and *karkadann/khadgá* has not been completely forgotten, however. Benveniste (1929, 375) suggests that the words are linked by the physical resemblance of a pig and a rhinoceros (cf. Strabo's description), and this was noted without comment by Panaino (2001, 161, n. 75). A similar argument was made, prior to the refutation of the translation, in Delitzsch's *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (1896, 649, s.v. *šahū*) in an attempt to explain the equation of Sumerian *šaḥ.tur* "piglet" to *kurkizannu* in lexical texts. Delitzsch argued that *šaḥ* was a determinative for "aller im Schlamm wühlenden Thiere wie Eber, Rhinoceros u.a.m." Nonetheless, despite the phonetic similarity of *kurkizannu* and *karkadann*, there is no good reason to connect the two, and there is no longer any suggestion that the Akkadian word means rhinoceros.

The second suggestion, that of Barton (1926, 92–94), was that the Sumerian word *am*, Akkadian *rimu*, "wild bull," originated as a word for rhinoceros, and acquired its common reading only later, after the rhinoceros went extinct. There is no evidence that rhinoceroses were indigenous to Mesopotamia in historical times, and Barton's suggestion seems never to have been seriously considered by other scholars.

Most recently, Sjöberg (2005, 296, n. 9) has tentatively suggested understanding Sumerian *gu₄-si-aš* to have originated as a term for rhinoceros. This idea has not so far been taken up by the ePSD2, which translates "battering ram," and the present writer can find no evidence that Sjöberg's suggestion has been considered by anyone else.

None of these suggestions have any direct bearing on the present argument.

⁵⁰ Collon 1977, 219, n. 4 describes the group as containing an elephant, a crocodile, and a hippopotamus, but this is clearly incorrect. The animal depicted is clearly a rhinoceros, and in any case the Indus valley does not have hippos.

⁵¹ Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. My thanks to Susanne Paulus and Susan Allison for their kindness in organising permission for publication. The image published here is negative number N.11517a. The rolling itself is numbered C599a and C599b. The original seal is now held in Baghdad with the museum number IM 14674.

⁵² Potts 1997, 260.

⁵³ Frankfort 1932, 52; 1939, 305; 1955, 45–46; van Buren 1936–1937, 28; Parpola 1994, 314.

⁵⁴ During-Caspers 1973, 261.

of an Indus seal carved on the spot,⁵⁵ or, most recently, either a genuine Oxus civilisation seal or a mixed Oxus-Indus seal.⁵⁶ Regardless, it was excavated in Mesopotamia.

Another cylinder seal, this one made of agate, is slightly less straightforward.⁵⁷ It contains a scene featuring several exotic animals:



Fig. 3: de Clercq I 26. Cylinder seal of unknown date and provenience. Courtesy of Omar Khan. Photo credit: M. Chuzeville.

The animal in the centre of the bottom register of this impression, beneath the large bird, has been identified as both a rhinoceros⁵⁸ and an elephant.⁵⁹ The seal was first published in 1888, in the catalogue of the de Clercq⁶⁰ collection, and all subsequent studies seem to be based on the image in this publication, or the republication of the same image by Weber.⁶¹ The current location of the seal is unknown, but the rolling in Fig. 3 was published online⁶² and offers a far clearer

⁵⁵ Van der Geer 2008, 385.

⁵⁶ Winkelmann 2021, 248. Note that Winkelmann includes both the seals discussed here in her description. While the iconography may be Oxus-inspired, the seals themselves are very unlikely to be genuine Oxus products – the Ešnunna seal was discovered surrounded by “other Harappan knickknacks” (During-Caspers 1994, 103), and the unprovenanced seal bears an apparent inscription in the Indus script.

⁵⁷ Eckhard Unger is said by Brentjes 1961, 18, to have described the seal as a forgery, but no reference is given and I have been unable to find his reasoning. In any case, Brentjes rejects the idea that the seal is a forgery.

⁵⁸ De Clercq 1888, 40, no. 26; Keller 1909, 387; Kinzelbach 2012, 102.

⁵⁹ Brentjes 1961, 18; Collon 1977, 19, n. 4.

⁶⁰ De Clercq 1888, 40, no. 26.

⁶¹ Weber 1920, pl. 17, no. 176.

⁶² My thanks to Omar Khan of the Harappa.com website for sending me this photograph (first published at <https://www.harappa.com/content/growing-foreign-world-history-meluha-villages-mesopotamia-3rd-millennium-bce> (30.07.2021)). On the website, this image is credited to M. Chuzeville of the Louvre. Omar Khan remembers asking permission from the Louvre to publish the photo online, but unfortunately knows no more about it. My thanks also to Ariane Thomas and Marianne Cotty of

image, demonstrating beyond doubt that a rhino is represented. The date of the seal is unknown, but the apparent use of the Indus script in the two “fish” signs flanking the legs of the god holding snake-dragons,⁶³ means it is likely to be roughly contemporary with the other seal.⁶⁴

Plainly these seals are not evidence that the rhinoceros was well-known in Mesopotamia, but they do show that it was not completely unknown. Both are influenced by the iconographic style of Indus, or perhaps Oxus, seals, and presumably were connected to foreign traders either visiting, or resident in, Mesopotamia. Although the origins of the seals are unknown, their shape makes it likely that they were carved in Mesopotamia. Indus civilisation seals, with very few exceptions, were square stamp seals, not cylinders, just four of which have been found at Indus sites.⁶⁵

Cylinder seals were produced by the Oxus civilisation,⁶⁶ but the earliest official excavations of Oxus sites took place in the 1970s, and it is unlikely that, a century earlier, de Clercq could have bought an unusually foreign looking seal discovered at an Oxus site. We assume, therefore, that they were produced in Mesopotamia⁶⁷ and that at least a couple of Mesopotamian seal-cutters in the mid-to late third millennium, will have asked a foreign customer about the weird animals they were carving. Equally, anybody involved in a seal-worthy transaction with the owners of the seals must have noticed the unusual creature.

the Louvre for their help in searching for the seal itself. While it was not found in the collections of the Louvre, it seems that at the very least a rolling must be held there, as the image in Fig. 3 differs from that published in Weber 1920 and de Clercq 1888, in which the rhino is at either edge of the impression rather than the middle, and so must have been taken from a different rolling.

⁶³ This is presumably what Collon (1987, 144) means when she refers to “an inscription in the so-far undeciphered Indus Valley script” on this seal.

⁶⁴ Weber 1920, pl. 17, no. 176 tentatively suggests a 4th millennium BC date, while Karpeles 1901, 73 offers “ca. 5,000 v. Chr.” Both should be ignored.

⁶⁵ Possehl 2002, 331–332.

⁶⁶ Winkelmann 2021, 235–239.

⁶⁷ Corbiau (1936, 100) suggests that the seals are evidence of a “local Indian industry in Mesopotamia, or, at least, in connexion with Mesopotamia.” There is no way to refute this, but it does not materially affect the question under discussion if the seal carver was Indian. It is worth noting in this regard, however, that the idea of a “Meluḥḥan village” within Mesopotamia, as first suggested by Parpola, Parpola and Brunswig Jr (1977, 150–155) has been comprehensively discredited by Laursen and Steinkeller (2017, 79–82). The textual evidence for Meluḥḥans resident in Mesopotamia has recently been assembled by Ambos (2020, 35–37) and amounts to two named individuals (Na-na-za and Sa_a-ma-ar), a translator of Meluḥḥan with a Sumerian name (Šu-ilišu), and perhaps somebody named Meluḥḥa, though the nature of his connection to India is unknown. Plainly, there was a great deal more contact than these meagre traces show (see, e.g., Gadd 1932, 16; Possehl 2002, 327; Vidale 2004, 264–271; Kenoyer 2008, 24–25; Laursen 2010, 96), but there is no good reason to assume an “industry.” Interestingly, the two named Meluḥḥans served as sipad a-dara₄-me “bezoar shepherds,” which is to say their role was to care for exotic animals (Laursen and Steinkeller 2017, 83).

They might then have asked about it, and been told about its size and power, and perhaps decided that the carving made it look a bit like a donkey with a horn. This is precisely the level of vague awareness of a foreign creature that would be required for a rhinoceros to acquire a name like “donkey of the east” which could later have morphed into “donkey of Anshan.”⁶⁸

Two, or perhaps three, other depictions of rhinos are found in the ancient Near East, though they date from much later periods than either the seals or our proverb.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, they tend to reinforce our argument that the rhinoceros, as an entirely foreign and exotic beast, was described in terms of more familiar creatures. The most famous, from over a thousand years later than our bilingual proverb, is the animal that has long been thought to be a rhinoceros on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. In one of the first Assyriological publications, Austen Henry Layard described “an animal which appears to represent a rhinoceros, although inaccurately delineated in several respects.”⁷⁰ This has been taken up by most subsequent studies.⁷¹ The animal in question is plainly not much like a rhinoceros, but rather like a bull with the horn of a unicorn. Here we see, as with the classical texts discussed above, in depicting a rhino, an artist who had apparently never seen one instead drew an animal with which he was familiar

⁶⁸ In addition, it is worth remembering that the rhinoceros is a frequent motif on Indus seals. Although none have been found in a Mesopotamian context, the existence of international trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus means that they would certainly have been seen in Mesopotamia before the Old Babylonian period.

An Indus or Oxus seal could not have been easily mistaken for an Anshan seal, and so the name “Donkey of Anshan” must be understood as a later development. Perhaps this was due to the phonetic requirements of the proverb (see above §2), or it could have been due to later confusion about the origin of the unfamiliar animal (see below §4ii).

⁶⁹ Two other near eastern seals featuring rhinoceroses are listed by Chabouillet (1858, 181 and 259) in his catalogue of cameos and engraved stones held in the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France: “1216. Rhinocéros passant à g. Sceau annulaire. Agate foncée rubanée. H. 10 mill. L. 15 mill.” and “1971. Rhinocéros. Sous le ventre, symbole qui ressemble à l’extrémité d’un caducée. Cornaline. H. 7 mill. L. 8 mill.”

In fact, neither seal seems to represent a rhinoceros. 1216 is a Sassanian conoid seal with an image of a zebu – a very common motif in Sassanid seals (see now Gyselen 1994, 120, pl. XXIV, no. 30K11); 1971 (now numbered Inv.58.1971; pictures available at <http://medaillesantiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gb24z84> (30.07.2021)) is a very small Roman intaglio with an engraving of what seems to be a bull or an ox, though due to its size, it is not completely clear. Regardless, as this is a Roman carving, it is of almost no importance for our study.

My thanks are due to Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet of the Bibliothèque nationale de France for her help with finding and identifying these objects.

⁷⁰ Layard 1853, pl. 54.

⁷¹ See Grayson 1996, 63 for bibliography. Note, however, that there has not been complete consensus on the identification, e.g., Mitchell (2000, 189) suggests that the animal in question is a strangely depicted bull. The Akkadian word assumed to refer to the rhinoceros in the accompanying inscription is *sadēja* (CAD S, 17, s.v. *sadēja*), but as the animal in question is said to come from Egypt rather than India, and is in any case over a thousand years later than our proverb, this is of no concern.

and adapted it by adding a horn. Admittedly, this points to a bull rather than a donkey as the Mesopotamian rhinoceros analogue of choice, but it is possible that a different person a thousand years earlier could have reached for a donkey instead.



Fig. 4: Detail of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. Taken from: Layard 1853, pl. 54.

Later still, in the Hellenistic period tomb of Apollophanes at Tell Maresha in modern Israel, a very un-lifelike rhinoceros is depicted. This animal, which is clearly labelled in Greek $\rho\iota\nu\omicron\kappa\epsilon\rho\omega\varsigma$ “rhinoceros,” is part of a procession of animals which seems to have been connected to the cult of Dionysus. It is evident from the faint second horn on the animal labelled rhinoceros that an African rather than an Indian animal is what the artist had in mind,⁷² but it is equally clear that he had never seen one:



Fig. 5: Detail of the animal procession frieze in Tomb I at Marisa. Taken from: Peters and Thiersch 1905, pl. 10.

⁷² Meyboom 1995, 284, n. 13, and Kinzelbach 2012, 104 identify it as a white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*).

Ragnar Kinzelbach considers the animal to be a fairly close representation of a white rhinoceros,⁷³ but he is alone among modern commentators, who have otherwise universally commented on the crudity of the depiction.⁷⁴ It is difficult for the present writer not to see a pig with a horn.

Another animal in the same frieze may also be a rhinoceros, though opinions differ as the label is not clearly preserved:



Fig. 6: Detail of the animal procession frieze in Tomb I at Marisa. Taken from: Peters and Thiersch 1905, pl. 14.

The excavators of the tomb read .ΛΟΦ... and tentatively restored [*hy*]loph[ágos] “wood-eating,” leaving the animal unidentified, though they noted that it was probably in the rhinoceros family.⁷⁵ In an addendum they note a restoration, [AI]ΛΟΥ[POC] “cat,” suggested by Robert Macalister based on examination of the original paintings before they were destroyed.⁷⁶ David Jacobson, noting the implausibility of the animal being a cat instead restores [E]ΛΑΦ[OC] “deer,” arguing that Aristotle “erroneously believed that the oryx and Indian ass possessed only one horn, no doubt because he had not seen those animals first-hand.”⁷⁷ Both Eliezer Hammerstein and Paul Meyboom argue that the animal is a black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*), Meyboom following the restoration

⁷³ Kinzelbach 2012, 104.

⁷⁴ Peters and Thiersch 1905, 26; Kloner 1993, 955; Jacobson 2007, 30. Kloner goes so far as to suggest it could be a hippopotamus despite the label.

⁷⁵ Peters and Thiersch 1905, 27-28. Kloner 1993, 955 describes the animal as like “a tapir with a horn on its snout.” The reference to a tapir was presumably taken from Peters and Thiersch 1905, 28, who compared “the body, the relatively slender trunk, and the long thin tail” to that of a tapir. It should be said, contra Kinzelbach 2012, 104, that nobody has claimed the animal represented is in fact a tapir, which, with the exception of the Malayan tapir (*Acrocodia indica*) found in Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula, is an American animal.

⁷⁶ Peters and Thiersch 1905, 2, n. 28.

⁷⁷ Jacobson 2007, 34. My thanks are due to Dr Jacobson for providing a copy of the relevant pages of his book. Compare Pseudo-Oppian’s description of a rhinoceros (see above §3) as “not much larger than the bounding Oryx.”

[*hy*]/*loph*[*ágos*] “wood-eating,” and arguing that it referred to the black rhino’s habit of browsing for food from trees.⁷⁸ Most recently, Kinzelbach has suggested a reading .ONOS... “Indian rhinoceros,” assuming that the apparent Λ of the inscription is an inverted N. He understands this word to be derived from a phrase used by Herodotus to refer to African rhinos *ónoi keráta echóntes*, “which later transferred was as (*sic*) “*ónos índikos*” to the Indian rhino.”⁷⁹

There are severe difficulties with most of these interpretations. The other animals in the frieze are all given names, not descriptive titles, so “wood-eating” is very unlikely, the animal is plainly not any kind of cat, and as William Gowers convincingly detailed, the black rhinoceros was unknown in the classical period – all attestations in Graeco-Roman sources are to either white or Indian rhinos, both of which are easier to handle, as well as being larger, than black rhinos.⁸⁰ Kinzelbach’s suggestion requires emendation of the inscription, as well as leaving the damaged letters unexplained, and assuming the use of a fairly obscure term. None of these objections is fatal, and if this is another image of a rhino, it is surprisingly close to a lifelike, if rather weedy, depiction. In this case, however, we might be justified in asking why the other depiction of a rhino in this frieze is so unlike a rhino. The only obvious drawback to the reading “deer” is that the animal does not particularly resemble a deer, but as this is the case for several of the animals depicted in the frieze – not least the labelled rhinoceros just discussed – this is perhaps the least objectionable interpretation.

Whatever the animal depicted, it is plain that the artist was not depicting a creature with which he was intimately familiar, which is not true of some of the other animals in the frieze – both the porcupine and the elephant included in the images above are reasonably true to life, as are several other of the animals depicted. For both putative rhinos, the artist has drawn a sort of generic animal shape, then added a horn at the front. This is very much the same principle by which we envisage the rhino could have become the “donkey of Anšan.”

ii. Live rhinoceroses?

Apart from these very few depictions, spread across nearly two millennia, and from as far east as Ešnunna and as far west as Tell Maresha, no other iconographic evidence of rhinoceroses is preserved from the ancient Near East. This paucity of information demonstrates that the rhino remained little known throughout the region. Nonetheless, it does not mean that it remained completely unknown. It is clear from the examples of the GÚ.URUxGU and the ur gùn-a

⁷⁸ Meyboom 1995, 285–286, n. 22, and Hammerstein 1980, 94 (*non vidi*, cited in Jacobson 2007, 34).

⁷⁹ Kinzelbach 2012, 104.

⁸⁰ Gowers 1950, 71.

Me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}, discussed above (§3), that gifts of exotic animals were a feature of the Ur III period. Each of these examples is known from a vanishingly small number of texts, and so it is wholly plausible that the record of a one-off gift of a rhinoceros from a distant land has simply not yet been found. Clear records of Indian rhinoceroses held in captivity in distant lands are available – more or less continuously – from the early 15th century AD, including some who were tame enough to be given free rein to “roam among the house guests,”⁸¹ and accounts of dozens more which could have been either Indian or African rhinos are found from as early as 275 BC.⁸²

Particularly noteworthy for present purposes is the record in Chapter 88 of the Chinese historical chronicle *Hou Hanshu*, “Book of the Later Han,” attesting to the presence of rhinoceroses around the area of Susa in the first century AD: “In the Kingdom of Tiaozi (Characene and Susiana) there is a town on the top of a hill that is more than 40 *li* (16.6 km) in circumference (Susa)... This region is hot and humid. It produces lions, rhinoceroses, zebu cattle, peacocks, and giant birds (ostriches).”⁸³ Kees Rookmaaker has made a thorough search for sources of information concerning the historical range of the rhinoceros, producing reasonably solid evidence that until the sixteenth century there were rhinos present as far west as Afghanistan.⁸⁴ No evidence has so far been uncovered indicating that the historical range of wild rhinos went any further west than this, but animals from the Indus Valley civilisation could certainly be brought to Mesopotamia.⁸⁵ As it is unlikely that the region “produced” rhinoceroses, Stanley Burstein suggests that the *Hou Hanshu* might refer to a “Parthian hunting park.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Rookmaaker et al. 1998, 62. This particular quote refers to the rhinoceros known as Clara, who made a very extensive tour of Europe between 1741 and her death in 1758, but *ibid.*, 37, tab. 22 records over 100 rhinos held in captivity before the 20th century. For more on Clara, see Ridley 2005.

⁸² Rookmaaker et al. 1998, 27–32.

⁸³ Hill 2003, Section 9.

⁸⁴ Rookmaaker 2000, 74. Hatt 1959, 54 points out that rhinos were found in the Near East in the middle Palaeolithic age, as attested by a rhinoceros tooth found in a cave at Barda Balka dating to around 100,000 years ago. Hatt also notes that two now extinct species of rhinoceros are attested in remains found in Palestine from around the same time, and that the Barda Balka tooth may also be from an extinct species. These have no bearing on the question in hand.

⁸⁵ Apart from the GÚ.URUxGU and the ur gùn-a Me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}, discussed above, other Meluḥḥan animals apparently brought to Mesopotamia include elephants, chickens, water buffalo, monkeys, zebu (Laursen and Steinkeller 2017, 87–88), and perhaps peacocks (Ambos 2020, 50). Surprisingly, there is strong evidence that Indian monkeys, specifically langurs, or at least knowledge of them, even made it as far as the Aegean during the 2nd millennium BC (Pareja et al. 2020, 159–166).

⁸⁶ Burstein 1989, 119–120, n. 3. Two objects are also of interest: a Sasanian period chess piece found at Susa, and a 5th century AD spindle found in Alexandria, Egypt, are both made of Indian rhinoceros ivory (Rahimifar and Poplin 2006, 1120–1125, figs. 2 and 6). These pieces could, of course, have been made in India and exported, and they are in any case very late, but, assuming their origin was known, they are further evidence of knowledge of the rhino in the Near East.

The Parthian period is around two millennia later than our proverb, but the fact that there were live rhinos near Susa in ancient times means that they were imported, and it is no great stretch to think that in earlier periods rhinos were imported in the same way.

If a rhinoceros was in fact imported from the Far East, it is possible that the association with Anšan arose through a misunderstanding. A modern analogue is the turkey. The word “turkey” was originally applied to the Guinea Fowl, which was imported to Europe from Madagascar by way of Turkish merchants. When the turkey was discovered in America, the bird was given the same name, despite having no connection to Turkey whatsoever. Similarly, the Scottish-Gaelic word for the turkey is *coilleach frangach*, literally “French cock.”⁸⁷ Perhaps stories of the great donkey beast of the east passed to Mesopotamia through merchants in Anšan, and the stories were confused along the way. Alternatively, perhaps the kings of Anšan had received a rhino as a gift from the kings of Meluḥḥa, and gave it in turn to a Mesopotamian king, or it could even have been taken as booty during one of the many raids on Anšan that mark the Ur III period.

There is, of course, no proof that a live rhino was present in Mesopotamia before the Parthian period, but it is not particularly improbable given the array of other exotic animals imported in Ur III times. Regardless, the iconographic evidence demonstrates that there was at least a vague conception of the rhino in Mesopotamia. Whether or not a live rhinoceros was known, stories of a massive, donkeyish animal from the east could easily have reached Nippur by the Old Babylonian period when our bilingual proverb was written down.⁸⁸

5. The concluding simile: parallels and meaning

Before closing, it is worth considering the concluding simile, in which the animals depicted are said to fell trees as though they were leeks. The same simile is used in two incantations from the third tablet of the ritual and incantation series *Alan-níg-sag-il-la*.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Syphilis offers another parallel. The disease may have arrived in Europe from America in the early 16th century. Before the term syphilis was coined in a 1530 poem by Giacomo Fracastoro (taken from a character in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) the disease was known as the French disease in Italy, the Italian disease in France, the Spanish disease in the Netherlands, the Polish disease in Russia, and the Christian disease in Turkey. Admittedly, xenophobia played a large role in these names, but the principle is the same.

⁸⁸ It is worth noting that if our identification of the rhinoceros in the proverb under discussion is accepted, it would be the earliest textual reference to the Indian rhinoceros so far known.

⁸⁹ Campbell Thompson 1903, pl. 29. The series *Alan-níg-sag-il-la*, which is the ritual for making a cult image, will be edited by Schramm. Outside of the lines translated throughout the CAD (the lines under discussion here are in CAD H: 92, s.v. *ḥarāšu*; K: 213, s.v. *karāšu* B; and M/1: 291, s.v. *maršu*), the only edition of tablet 3 so far published is in Campbell Thompson 1904, 98–103.

K 1284+, 13. nam-tar lú-tu-ra ga-raš^{sar}-gin₇ ba-an-gurum

K 1284+, 14. mar-ša ki-ma ka-ra-ši iḥ-ta-ra-aš

Namtar bends the sick man like a leek

(Namtar) breaks off the sick (man) like a leek

and.⁹⁰

K 1283, 11. [tur-tur-ra] ga-raš^{sar}-gin₇ mu-un-mu₁₁-mu₁₁-e-ne

K 1283, 12 [ši-iḥ-ḥi-ru]-ti ki-ma ka-ra-šu i'-[ḥaš]-šu-ú

They chop up the [young] like leek

They c[ho]p up the [youn]g like leek

Although in the first example the same verb, *ḥarāšu* “to cut down, to cut off,” is used in the Akkadian line as is used in our bilingual proverb, the Sumerian differs. The CAD considers *gurum* in K 1284+, 13 to be an error for *kud*,⁹¹ the commonly used logogram for *ḥarāšu*. This emendation is unnecessary, however. A photograph of the tablet shows that the GAM sign, to be read *gurum*, and indeed the entire tablet, is very clearly written.⁹² In contrast to *kud* which means “to cut,” the basic meaning of *gurum* is “to bend, to bend over,” which, though not normally a synonym, makes reasonably good sense in the context. Leeks are harvested not by cutting, but by digging, and as long as the soil is not too hard they can be pulled up simply by bending them down from the top. The line does not refer to the Namtar demon slicing up and destroying the sick man,⁹³ but rather to preventing him from flourishing, as can be seen from the surrounding lines of the incantation, in which Namtar is said to have “seized” the man and to have “bound his limbs.”⁹⁴

The second incantation, on the other hand, describes the demonic forces – in this case a wide array of evil spirits – as “chopping up” the young. This likewise accords with the surrounding lines of the incantation, in which the evil spirits are said to “slaughter” men, “smite” the hero, and “crush” the maiden.⁹⁵ In this case, a different verb, *ḥašū* (Sumerian *mu₁₁*) “to chop up,” is used, and the simile is clearly distinct from the other two presented here.

The use of *ša b* “to cut” in the Sumerian version of our bilingual proverb does not imply any particular closeness to the second incantation, however, as this

⁹⁰ After the transliteration in CAD H: 145, s.v. *ḥašū* A. The first word in each line is restored by Campbell Thompson 1903, pl. 31 from the copy in IVR² 16, 2. The signs are no longer present in the photograph of the tablet, cf.: <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P393876.jpg> (30.07.2021).

⁹¹ CAD H: 92, s.v. *ḥarāšu*.

⁹² See: <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P393877.jpg> (30.07.2021).

⁹³ Pace Campbell Thompson 1904, 99, ll. 13–14: “Plague-god that teareth the sick man in shreds like a leek.”

⁹⁴ After *ibid.*, ll. 10–15.

⁹⁵ After *ibid.*, 105, ll. 8–10.

is the technical term for the action of felling trees, and so relates explicitly to the breaking down of the strawberry trees. The simile in the proverb, therefore, exaggerates the strength of the animals – they are so strong that they can fell trees as though they were “felling” leeks. What we can take from this is that leeks had roughly the same connotations of weakness in Sumerian and Akkadian as they do in modern German – *Lauch* being the archetypal insult for a puny wimp. Taken at face value, the sense of the proverb seems to be that the animals are so mighty that a large tree is no more to them than a puny leek.

Nonetheless, beneath this straightforward reading, it is probable that the proverb has further layers of meaning. We should consider the fact that, as a particularly fecund fruit tree, the strawberry tree was no doubt highly desirable to wild animals – bears, rhinos, and elephants are all omnivorous and eat huge quantities of fruit when it is available. Big cats are carnivorous, and so do not particularly share this trait, but recent research has found that “many feline species regularly consume plant matter,”⁹⁶ and it should be borne in mind that the proverb was written by a scribe with no clear idea about the animals involved – the basic thought may have been no more than “big animals eat a lot of fruit.” Animals are not careful foragers, and frequently damage trees as they eat the fruit from them. This would doubtless be exacerbated by the fact that the fruit of the strawberry tree begins to ferment as soon as it is ripe.⁹⁷ If elephants, bears, rhinos, and big cats eating from a tree can damage it, how much worse might the damage be if the animals are drunk? In this reading, it is not merely the animals’ strength that destroys the trees, but their greed (and drunkenness) coupled with their physical power.

A final element worth thinking about is that the strawberry tree has a clear symbolic association with sex in Sumerian thought.⁹⁸ The implications of this for the sense of the proverb are not immediately clear. It is possible that the intended image is one of sexual voracity – the animals are so sexually rapacious that they can knock down the sexiest tree as though it were a leek. Sexual voracity is not, perhaps, the first thought that comes to mind when considering rhinos, but again, the scribe likely had only a relatively vague idea of what the animals were

⁹⁶ Xiong et al. 2015, 1059–1061. See also Yoshimura et al. 2020, 1–2.

⁹⁷ See: <https://botanicgardens.uw.edu/about/blog/2016/11/26/december-2016-plant-profile-arbutus-unedo> (30.07.2021). The writings of the mediaeval French crusader Bertrandon de la Broquiere also contain reference to this: “En la ditte montaigne a petis arbres qui portent ung fruit plus groz que grosses cherises et de la façon et goust de freses, excepté qu’il est ung pou plus aigret, et est très plaisant a mengier: mais qui en mengue beaucoup, il enteste les gens, comme qui seroit yvre, et le treuve on en novembre et en decem brelv.” (Cappellini 1999, 557, ll. 172, 6–7). The editor notes in her commentary that “L’arbre dont il est question dans ce passage est l’arbusier.” (ibid., 686, l. 172 IV).

⁹⁸ This will be detailed in a forthcoming paper (see n. 5).

actually like – the main thing was that their names sounded good together, and that a meaningful proverb could be built from them. Biological veracity came lower on the list of concerns.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to consider the proverb as a whole. The picture built-up through analysis of the simile is one of overpowering force and appetite. The animals are incredibly strong, incredibly greedy, incredibly drunk, or incredibly sexual, or perhaps a combination of all four. It is a pity that we cannot compare this to its use in normal conversation, but how, and indeed whether, the proverb was actually used is completely unknown. What we can appreciate, however, is the skill with which it was assembled. The euphony present throughout demonstrates that the words were carefully chosen, and, as Steinkeller has pointed out, the whole proverb is also geographically organised, with the lands listed in order from west to east.⁹⁹ This led Civil to suggest that the animals may stand figuratively, or through alliteration or pun, for the lands from which they are said to come.¹⁰⁰ As we have seen, however, the animals dealt with in the proverb are plausibly identifiable with actual animals, and the practice of presenting exotic animals as diplomatic gifts makes it likely that they actually came, or were thought to have come, from the lands in question.

Jay Crisostomo has recently demonstrated that Sumerian and bilingual proverb collections were assembled using the same sorts of analogical techniques as were lexical lists, and that individual proverbs could be generated, among other methods, through interlingual phonological analogies.¹⁰¹ That is to say, phonetic correspondences between Sumerian and Akkadian words and phrases could play a major role in the development of proverbs. This offers a rather better way of interpreting the bilingual proverb under examination here. As we have discussed, there are clear interlingual analogies in the proverb between Sumerian, Akkadian, and whichever foreign languages the animal names came from. Following Crisostomo's argument, these should be understood as the basis from which the text developed. The euphonic juxtaposition of the elements involved – the foreign names for powerful, exotic animals, the foreign place names, and the name of a large fruit tree with culturally symbolic connotations – is the root of the proverb. The succession of very rare words we have examined here is, therefore, not merely an aesthetic choice, but is in fact fundamental to the development of meaning in this text.

⁹⁹ Steinkeller 1980, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Civil 1998, 11–12, n. 6.

¹⁰¹ Crisostomo 2019, 154–155.

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ABSTRACTS

Frank SIMONS (Trinity College Dublin)

THE DONKEY OF ANŠAN: A RHINO IN MESOPOTAMIA? NOTES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN A BILINGUAL PROVERB

(pp. 1–31)

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This paper is a detailed study of a short bilingual proverb about exotic animals. It is suggested that one of these animals is an Indian rhinoceros, and that the proverb is the earliest textual reference to this animal in world history. In support of this suggestion a comprehensive investigation of the evidence for rhinoceroses in Mesopotamia is presented, and a wide array of comparative material from ancient Greece, Rome, India, China, Persia, and Arabia is adduced. Alongside the discussion of the animals involved, the form and structure of the proverb is investigated, with consideration of the ways in which its poetic quality influenced its construction, and of the nuances behind the concluding simile.

Vasileios ADAMIDIS (Nottingham Trent University)

POPULISM IN POWER? A RECONSIDERATION OF THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY OF THE LATE 5TH CENTURY BC (pp. 33–63)

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The function and the nature of the Athenian *dēmokratia* have been much contested issues over the centuries. This study aims to offer an original and cross-disciplinary examination of this system. By reference to the latest trends in modern political theory concerning the salient phenomenon of populism, the paper demonstrates the suitability of this concept for close analysis of the Athenian political structures and practices, revealing that it is time for the Athenian *dēmokratia* and its ideology to be critically reconsidered. The danger of anachronism notwithstanding, the *dēmokratia* of late 5th century BC Athens exhibits characteristics that could classify it as a prototype populist regime.

Houliang LÜ (Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)
PAUSANIAS' CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN HIS *DESCRIPTION OF GREECE*

(pp. 65–95)

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As one of the most important extant examples of ancient Greek περιήγησις, the *Description of Greece* by the traveler Pausanias, who lived during the Antonine Dynasty, offers a highly selective narrative to its readers. On the one hand, Pausanias generally ignores or criticizes monuments, institutions, and the history of Greece under Roman imperial rule, and excludes these elements from the cultural memory of “Independent Greece.” On the other hand, the author intentionally constructs close correspondences between archaic and classical Greek history and the philhellenic policies of certain Roman emperors, assigning cultural memory an overriding importance in the contemporary political behavior and literary discourse of Pausanias’ time in the *Description of Greece*. The unique structure of Pausanias’ cultural memory reflects the character of *hypolepse* in the historical perspective of ancient Greek intellectuals, and to some extent proves the influence of the philhellenic policies of the Roman emperors in the second century AD.

Oliver STOLL (Universität Passau)

SCHAUSPIELER, JÄGER UND GLADIATOREN: BEMERKUNGEN ZUR „TRUPPENBETREUUNG“ IN DER KAISERZEITLICHEN ARMEE ROMS (pp. 97–141)

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Roman imperial soldiers were no philistines. In and outside of service there were manifold connections to multifunctional building types as amphitheatres and theatres, to games, plays, music and dance. Was there a “troop entertainment,” what about military theatre groups, hunters and gladiators? A short look is taken at the embedding (or the affiliation), the question of status, hierarchy and the “Rangordnung” of these men. The article aims at a critical look on the source-material from different frontier-regions, which is manifold (archaeological, epigraphical, historiographical/ juridical), but not always open to easy interpretation. Of course, we know basically something about the vice-versa influence of gladiators and soldiers (e.g., training) or about soldiers as animal-hunters for the organization of imperial games. But many aspects are still nebulous: Are the organisation and the application area of such troop-

entertainment-arrangements (closely linked to the calendar-dates of the Emperor Cult and a welcome opportunity for creating a “festive cohesion” with the surrounding civilians) also connected with economic considerations? Can we know anything about “the” general organization of such entertainment on the frontiers of the Imperium? Some answers must be given tentative in the end or can only be problematized and left open to further scientific investigation.

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Editors' Note

The *JOURNAL OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS (JAC)* is published annually in two fascicles by the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China).

The aim of *JAC* is to provide a forum for the discussion of various aspects of the cultural and historical processes in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world, encompassing studies of individual civilizations as well as common elements, contacts, and interactions among them (e.g., in such traditional fields as Assyriology, Egyptology, Hittitology, Classics, Byzantine Studies, and Sinology, among others). Hence, we publish the work of international scholars while also providing a showcase for the finest Chinese scholarship, and so welcome articles dealing with history, philology, art, archaeology, and linguistics that are intended to illuminate the material culture and society of the Ancient Near East, the Mediterranean region, and ancient China. Articles discussing other cultures will be considered for publication only if they are clearly relevant to the ancient Mediterranean world, the Near East, and China. Information about new discoveries and current scholarly events is also welcome. Publishers are encouraged to send review copies of books in the relevant fields.

JAC is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal. Articles must not have been published in, or submitted to, another publication at the time of submission. All submitted articles are first carefully read by at least two editors of *JAC*, who will give a feedback to the author. Articles (excluding book reviews or research reports) are afterwards reviewed anonymously by at least two referees in the specific field, appointed by the editorial board. The whole peer-review process as well as any judgment is based on the quality of the article and the research conducted therein only. In cases where the reviewers recommend changes in the manuscript, authors are requested to revise their articles. The final approval of articles is at the editorial board. Throughout the whole peer-review process, articles are treated confidentially. In case of (alleged or supposed) interest conflict, misconduct, or plagiarism of any party involved the editor in chief and/or the executive editor in chief (or, if necessary, another member of the editorial board) will pursue the case and should the situation of taking action arise, will notify the respective party. From time to time, we will publish a list of the referees on our homepage (<http://ihac.nenu.edu.cn/JAC.htm>), to make the double-blind peer-review process transparent and comprehensible.

The current first fascicle of *JAC* 37 comprises articles from Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Classics. Frank Simons analyzes a bilingual proverb about exotic animals, and by using linguistic as well as comparative approaches, he argues that one of these animals is to be identified with an Indian rhinoceros, what would make it the first mention of this animal in world history. Vasileios Adamidis deals with the hot topic of populism and asks whether and to what extent we can apply this concept to the Athenian *dēmokratia* of the late 5th century BC. Houliang Lü investigates how the Greek traveler and 2nd-century-AD author Pausanias selected classical sites for his *Description of Greece* while omitting or criticizing Roman-influenced institutions or buildings, in order to form a cultural memory of “Independent Greece” at times of Roman rule, which could nevertheless allow philhellenic Roman emperors to enter his narrative. The final paper by Oliver Stoll examines the sources for the often-neglected topic of the involvement of the Roman military in the organization of entertainment, especially at the frontiers of the Imperium Romanum.

All communications, manuscripts, disks, and books for review should be sent to the Assistant Editor, Journal of Ancient Civilizations, Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, 130024 Changchun, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China (e-mail: jac@nenu.edu.cn), or to the Executive Editor in Chief, Prof. Dr. Sven Günther, M.A. (e-mail: svenguenther@nenu.edu.cn or sveneca@aol.com).

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