

Sumerian t i r u = “eunuch” – In a famous passage of the Sumerian poem of Bilgames and the Netherworld, the shade of Enkidu reports to Bilgames on conditions in the Netherworld. The first part of the dialogue shows that a man’s post-mortem prospects improve the more sons he leaves behind, because he will have more descendants to supply him with the regular libations of water that the dead require (ll. 255–68 in the edition of A. Shaffer, *Sumerian Sources of Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1963). Following this, the poet moves on to another theme. In one manuscript this section begins with l ú i b i l a n u . t u k u , “the man with no heir” (MS V = *TuMNF* III 14, now + C. Wilcke, *Kollationen*, p. 21). In three manuscripts it begins instead with the t i r u (MSS F = Kramer, *SLTN* 5; H = Shaffer, pl. 6; DD = Radau, *HAV* 11). The relevant lines read:

t i r u . e i g i b í . d u ḫ . à m (i g i b í . d u ḫ . à [m] a . n a . g i n 7 a n . [a k])
 P A a . l a . l a ḫ u r . r a (v a r . ḫ u . r [u]) . g i n 7 u b . d u 1 1 . g a . a a b . ú s
 MSS F vi 2–3 // H v 44’–6’ // DD obv. 11–12 // V iii 23’–4’;
 cf. Shaffer, p. 91, 271–2

In his edition Shaffer translated as follows (p. 117):

“Did you see the palace retainer?” “I saw.” “How does he fare?”
 “Like an incompetent foreman (crying) ‘to work,’ he slinks in corners!”

Other translators follow suit:

“Hast du *jenen Höfling* gesehen?” (Enkidu:) “Ich habe ihn gesehen.” (Bilgamesch):
 “Wie ergeht es ihm?” (Enkidu:) “Wie ein Aufseher, der beim *alala*-Gesang (der Arbeiter) *unsachverständig (ist)*, lehnt er sich in die Ecken.”

W. H. Ph. Römer, *TUAT* II/1 (Gütersloh, 1986), p. 40

“Hai visto il sovrintendente di Palazzo, l’hai visto?”. “Sì, l’ho visto”. “Come sta?”.
 “Come un incompetente capo operaio, egli grida: ‘Al lavoro!’, mentre se ne sta all’ombra”.

G. Pettinato, *La saga di Gilgamesh* (Milan, 1989), p. 339; cf. p. 236

“Den Palastverwalter, sahst du den?” “Ich sah ihn:
 Wie ein inkompetenter Aufseher, der ‘An die Arbeit!’ ruft, steht er in der Ecke!”

K. Hecker, *TUAT* III/4 (Gütersloh, 1994), p. 743

Shaffer has recently brought less certainty to his interpretation:

– As-tu vu là un courtisan du palais? – Je l’ai vu là – Que fait-il?
 – Dans la maison, comme . . . , il est assis dans un recoin.

R. J. Tournay and A. Shaffer, *L’épopée de Gilgamesh* (Paris, 1994), p. 266

The problem is the second line, which has also been rendered by W. von Soden:

“Einem unerfahrenen Arbeitsaufseher gleich verkriecht er sich in den Winkel!”

Das Gilgamesch-Epos (4th edn, Stuttgart, 1982), p. 111

by J. Bottéro:

“Comme un contremaître incapable, il rase les murs (de honte)!”

L'Épopée de Gilgameš (Paris, 1992), p. 214⁴

and by Å. W. Sjöberg:

“ . . . like an incompetent foreman (crying) ‘*alala*’, he . . . corner(?)”

PSDA/1 (Philadelphia, 1992), p. 100

The key to the passage lies in its context. In all manuscripts the following lines deal in turn with the barren woman (ll. 273–4: m u n u s ù n u . t u) and young men and women who were unmarried, expressed as those “who had not laid bare their spouse’s lap” (ll. 275–78: ú r d a m . n a . k a t ú g n u . s i . g e). The manuscripts which omitted the man with no heir at the beginning of the section place him after the virgin spinster. Thereafter the text is broken for some nine lines. It resumes with a different category of persons, those who for one reason or another (disease, accident, violent death) were not physically intact on death. The place in the text of the lines dealing with the t i r u , at or near the beginning of a section that treats those who have no descendants, compels us to suppose that such a fellow was also typically childless.

The word t i r u (Akk. *tīrum*), last discussed by I. J. Gelb (*Studies Diakonoff*, p. 88), is a generic term often applied to personnel who were members of the palace household (*māri ekallim*) and attendant on the royal family (*manzāz pānī*). Thus diverse workers such as scribes, physicians, charioteers, butlers, bakers and barbers could all be designated t i r u . Given the common Near Eastern practice of using eunuchs as royal servants, especially those whose responsibilities brought them into regular contact with the palace women, we have to consider it very likely that the t i r u was childless because he was castrated.

In my reading the following line confirms this analysis: the difficult PA a . l a . l a ḫ u r . r a is not a foreman (u g u l a) incapable of leading the work-song, but some kind of stick (p a) incapable of performing its proper function:

“Did you see the palace eunuch?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”

“Like a useless *alala*-stick he is propped in a corner.”

The obvious symbolism of the “useless stick” bears comparison with the description of the eunuch as a “dry tree” in Isaiah 56: 3 (*‘ēš yābēš*; I thank J. D. Hawkins for this reference). My interpretation also makes it much easier to understand the continuation of the image, why in the Netherworld the t i r u is kept in a corner, out of the way and forgotten: he is like an old piece of worthless timber discarded in a shed. The Akkadian version of the text, which expands the simile into two lines, is poorly preserved but enough survives to show that it has to do with one or more items propped in a corner and so is much closer to the Sumerian than had previously been realized (SB *Gilgameš* XII 117–19):

[. . . *tāmur ātamar*]
ki-i šu-ri-in-ni dam-qt tūb-qa [x x]

[“Did you see the *eunuch*?” “I saw him.”]
Like a fine standard [. . .] corner,

