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ŠIDURI AND THETIS: A NOTE ON TWO PARALLEL SCENES (*GILGAMEŠ* OB VA + VB III AND HOM. *IL.* XXIV 120-132)

Francesco Sironi – Maurizio Viano*

Many parallels and similarities have been detected between Mesopotamian and Greek literatures, especially between the *Gilgameš* epic and the Homeric poems.[1] Among these parallels, the relationship between the ale-wife Šiduri in the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš* and Thetis in *Iliad* XXIV has been noted,[2] but deserves deeper study.[3]

Before delving into a comparison, a discussion of Šiduri in the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš* is in order. The passage discussed in the present article is attested in a single Old Babylonian manuscript, probably from Sippar (OB VA + VB). This passage recounts Gilgameš' encounter with the ale-wife, who appears to play a central role in guiding the hero towards the recognition of the limits of human nature. Nevertheless, the name Šiduri does not appear in this manuscript nor in any other Old

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1. For the relation between *Gilgameš* and the *Iliad*, see West 1997, 334-347, Rollinger 2015, Currie 2016 (in particular 169-183), Clarke 2019; for the relation of Near Eastern literatures to Greek literature see also Burkert 1992, Haubold 2013, Bachvarova 2015, Metcalf 2015, Kelly – Metcalf 2021.
2. This parallel has been briefly noted by Di Benedetto 1998, 315, Christensen 2008, 194, and Graziosi 2016, 69. For similarities between Šiduri on the one hand and Circe and Calypso on the other, see West 1997, 405-411. An echo of Siduri's speech in Hesiod *Op.* 42 is suggested by Naiden 2003.
3. Although the Old Babylonian version of *Gilgameš* and the *Iliad* are chronologically distant from one another, it is possible that motifs of the former survived and circulated in the Eastern Mediterranean; given the complexity of the issue, the relation between the *Iliad* and the OB and SB versions of *Gilgameš* will be addressed in a dedicated study, Sironi – Viano forthcoming. For different positions on the topic, see Rollinger 2015 and Matijević 2018. *Il.* XXIV is probably more recent than the rest of the poem (see Cerri 1986), but this does not affect our discussion. Seeking to precisely establish time, place, and mode of transmission of the Šiduri episode to Greece cannot but remain highly speculative; see the general considerations on the transmission of Mesopotamian motifs in van Dongen 2008, 240-241.

Babylonian source. In the Standard Babylonian version, the name of the ale-wife only appears in the line that introduces her (SB IX catch-line = SB X 1). Throughout the text she is always referred to by her profession, *sābîtu*, "ale-wife". As argued by George, "probably the Old Babylonian epic texts used the same device".[4] The absence of the ale-wife's name in the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš* is therefore due to a lacuna in the manuscript that does not preserve the beginning of the dialogue between Gilgameš and the ale-wife. Another problem concerns the nature of Šiduri before the Standard Babylonian version. In first millennium sources Šiduri is a goddess associated with wisdom and by Middle Babylonian times she had been assimilated with Ištar.[5] In the Hittite version from Ḫattuša – the earliest appearance of the name in the *Gilgameš* tradition – Šiduri is spelled without the divine determinative as ^{f}*Sí-du-ri-*(*iš*).[6] However, this should not be taken as direct evidence of her human nature; although the name Šiduri is spelled with the female determinative in one of the manuscripts of Tablet X in the Standard Babylonian Epic,[7] the other manuscripts have the divine determinative. Additionally, even if one accepts Beckman's hypothesis that this name was an epithet, "young woman", that only later in the Standard Babylonian Epic became the proper name of the ale-wife,[8] her divine nature seems to be supported by the Hurrian version, in which she is designated by the personal name ^{d}*Na-aḫ-ma-zu-le-el*. These pieces of evidence suggest that the ale-wife of the Old Babylonian version is identical to Šiduri in the Standard Babylonian Epic and probably had a divine nature.

In the Sippar tablet, Gilgameš, deeply afflicted by the death of his friend Enkidu, wanders through the wilderness questing for a way to escape death and reaches Šiduri, who lives by the seashore. In one of the most celebrated passages of Babylonian literature, Šiduri tells Gilgameš that he will not find eternal life and advises the hero to enjoy the pleasures of life.[9]

OB VA + VB iii

1	^{d}GIŠ *e-eš ta-da-a-al*	Gilgameš, where are you wandering?
2	*ba-la-ṭám ša ta-sa-aḫ-ḫu-ru la tu-ut-ta*	You cannot find the life that you seek:
3	*i-nu-ma* DINGIR.MEŠ *ib-nu-ú a-wi-lu-tam*	when the gods created mankind,
4	*mu-tam iš-ku-nu a-na a-wi-lu-tim*	for mankind they established death,
5	*ba-la-ṭam i-na qá-ti-šu-nu iṣ-ṣa-ab-tu*	life they kept for themselves.
6	*at-ta* ^{d}GIŠ *lu ma-li ka-ra-aš-ka*	You, Gilgameš, let your belly be full,
7	*ur-ri ù mu-ši ḫi-ta-ad-dú at-ta*	keep enjoying yourself, day and night!
8	*u*$_4$*-mi-ša-am šu-ku-un ḫi-du-tam*	Every day make merry,
9	*ur-ri ù mu-ši su-ur ù me-li-il*	dance and play day and night!
10	*lu ub-bu-bu ṣu-ba*$^{!}$(KU)*-tu-ka*	Let your clothes be clean!

4. George 2003, 148-149.
5. Lambert 1982, 208. Note that the character of Šiduri in the *Gilgameš* epic is not Ištar.
6. Beckman 2019, 12-13.
7. Manuscript D: ^{f}*Ši-d*[*u-ri*], see George 2003, 678.
8. Note that the term *šiduri* is associated with the young goddess Allanzu, who was the *šiduri* of Ḫebat, Laroche 1980, 229.
9. George 2003, 278-279.

11	*qá-qá-ad-ka lu me-si me-e lu ra-am-ka-ta*	Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water!
12	*ṣú-ub-bi ṣe-eḫ-ra-am ṣa-bi-tu qá-ti-ka*	Gaze on the little one who holds your hand!
13	*mar-ḫi-tum li-iḫ-ta-˹ad-da-a-am˺ i-na su-ni-˹ka˺*	Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
14	*an-na-ma ši-i*[*m-ti a-wi-lu-tim*ᵏ]	Such is the destiny [of mortal men].

Šiduri's speech has been often interpreted as the earliest example of the *carpe diem* theme, as it promotes a hedonistic view of life.[10] However, on closer inspection Šiduri does not advise the hero to consider pleasure to be the fulfilment of life. Rather, the goddess' advice centers around traditional ethical obligations, such as being a good father and husband.[11] Nothing in Šiduri's speech counters established ethical or religious values. Indeed, in a fully religious framework she reveals that immortality is reserved exclusively for the gods while death is the destiny that awaits mankind.

A scene in the *Iliad* shares many traits with the episode of Gilgameš and Šiduri in the Old Babylonian version of *Gilgameš*. At the beginning of *Il.* XXIV Achilles is experiencing the same loss and desperation as Gilgameš. Patroklos is dead and Achilles is desperately mourning him. In his wrath and grief Achilles ceaselessly disfigures Hector's body. The gods resolve to allow Priam to obtain his son's remains. Zeus sends Iris to call Thetis and asks her to inform Achilles of the gods' decision. In the following passage, Thetis promptly obeys and, before reporting the message, addresses her son (*Il.* XXIV 120-132):[12]

ὣς ἔφατ'· οὐδ' ἀπίθησε θεὰ Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα,
βῆ δὲ κατ' Οὐλύμποιο καρήνων ἀΐξασα,
ἷξεν δ' ἐς κλισίην οὗ υἱέος· ἐν δ' ἄρα τόν γε
ηὗρ' ἀδινὰ στενάχοντα· φίλοι δ' ἀμφ' αὐτὸν ἑταῖροι
ἐσσυμένως ἐπένοντο καὶ ἐντύνοντ' ἄριστον·
τοῖσι δ' ὄϊς λάσιος μέγας ἐν κλισίηι ἱέρευτο.
ἣ δὲ μάλ' ἄγχ' αὐτοῖο καθέζετο πότνια μήτηρ,
χειρί τέ μιν κατέρεξεν, ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν·
"τέκνον ἐμόν, τέο μέχρις ὀδυρόμενος καὶ ἀχεύων
σὴν ἔδεαι κραδίην, μεμνημένος οὔτέ τι σίτου
οὔτ' εὐνῆς; ἀγαθὸν δὲ γυναικί περ ἐν φιλότητι
μίσγεσθ'· οὐ γάρ μοι δηρὸν βέε', ἀλλά τοι ἤδη
ἄγχι παρέστηκεν θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή.

So he spoke; nor did the goddess Thetis of the silver feet disobey,
and she left, darting down from the heights of Olympus,
and made her way to her son's shelter; inside she found him

10. See Lambert 1995; Cohen 2013, 143-145.
11. See Viano in press; cf. George 2003, 275.
12. The text of the *Iliad* in this note is that of West 1998/2000; the translations from the *Iliad* are taken from Alexander 2015.

groaning without cessation; around him his close companions
busily attended to him and readied the morning meal;
a great fleecy sheep had been slain by them in the shelter.
His lady mother sat down close beside him,
and stroked his hand, and spoke to him and said his name:
"My child, how long will you devour your heart
in weeping and grieving, mindful neither of food
nor bed? Indeed, it is good to lie with a woman
in lovemaking; you will not be living long with me, but already
death stands close beside you and powerful destiny.

This scene and the Šiduri episode are structurally parallel, which is all the more evident if one considers the many similarities between the characters of Gilgameš and Achilles. In both passages, a male hero of semi-divine ancestry[13] is grieving for the loss of his best friend and meets a supernatural female figure by the sea.[14] Interestingly, neither female figure belongs to the circle of major gods; both are minor deities. In the two passages these figures recall the fate of human finitude and then propose a compensation for inevitable mortality? We have seen that Šiduri's speech has a hedonistic aura, which however does not make her words a manifesto of hedonism in the narrow sense, i.e., a lifestyle centered on pleasure as the qualifying element of human existence and as the compensation for mortality. Something similar is to be found in Thetis' address to Achilles. She invites her son to enjoy food and sexual activity. The Iliadic passage has been pointed out as the first occurrence of the *carpe diem* theme in Greek literature.[15] However, as we argue elsewhere,[16] this episode is only apparently hedonistic since it does not contradict heroic ethics (i.e., the value system entailing fame – not pleasure – as the compensation for mortality). In *Il.* IX Achilles recalled how he had once been offered an alternative between a glorious but short life and a long though obscure existence. After being outraged by Agamemnon, he was about to set aside the first and choose the latter, leaving the Achaean army and escaping the destiny of early death at Troy. After Patroclus is slain by Hector, Achilles changes his mind and returns to the battlefield to avenge his friend. In *Il.* XXIV Achilles has already consciously embarked on the path that will lead him to a glorious though premature death as a hero, and Thetis herself is well aware of this (131-132).[17]

The similarities between Šiduri's and Thetis' scenes can be summarized in the following table.

SIMILARITIES
Dialogue between a hero of matrilinear divine ancestry and a divine female figure

13. Gilgameš is the son of king Lugalbanda and the goddess Ninsun; the Standard Babylonian version adds that Gilgameš is two-thirds god and one-third human, see Fink 2013; Fink 2013/2014. Note that in the case of both Gilgameš and Achilles the divine ancestry is matrilinear.
14. This is not explicitly stated in the Iliadic passage, but the Achaean camp in the poem is on the seashore right next to the ships.
15. Cf. Gresseth 1975, 15.
16. Sironi – Viano forthcoming.
17. Earlier in book XXIV, Iris finds Thetis grieving over her son's destiny (83-86).

Scene set by the seashore
The hero is grieved by the passing of his best friend
The hero weeps before speaking to the divine female figure
The divine female figure mentions the hero's fated mortality
The divine female figure mentions the joys of life

At a deeper level of analysis, the structure of both passages can be broken down into three basic elements: A) an opening rhetorical question by the female figure concerning the hero's current state of mind; B) an insight into the hero's mortal fate; and C) an exhortation to enjoy what life offers. The difference is in the sequence of these elements in the two poems: in *Gilgameš* the sequence is ABC while in the *Iliad* the sequence is ACB.

***Gilgameš* OB VA + BM iii**		***Iliad* XXIV 128-132**	
A	1 ^{d}GIŠ *e-eš ta-da-a-al*	**A**	τέκνον ἐμὸν, τέο μέχρις ὀδυρόμενος καὶ ἀχεύων σὴν ἔδεαι κραδίην, μεμνημένος οὔτέ τι σίτου οὔτ᾽ εὐνῆς;
B	2 *ba-la-ṭám ša ta-sa-aḫ-ḫu-ru la tu-ut-ta* 3 *i-nu-ma* DINGIR.MEŠ *ib-nu-ú a-wi-lu-tam* 4 *mu-tam iš-ku-nu a-na a-wi-lu-tim* 5 *ba-la-ṭam i-na qá-ti-šu-nu iṣ-ṣa-ab-tu*	**C**	ἀγαθὸν δὲ γυναικί περ ἐν φιλότητι 130 μίσγεσθ᾽·
C	6 *at-ta* ^{d}GIŠ *lu ma-li ka-ra-aš-ka* 7 *ur-ri ù mu-ši ḫi-ta-ad-dú at-ta* 8 *u$_4$-mi-ša-am šu-ku-un ḫi-du-tam* 9 *ur-ri ù mu-ši su-ur ù me-li-il* 10 *lu ub-bu-bu ṣu-ba*$^{!}$(KU)*-tu-ka* 11 *qá-qá-ad-ka lu me-si me-e lu ra-am-ka-ta* 12 *ṣú-ub-bi ṣe-eḫ-ra-am ṣa-bi-tu qá-ti-ka* 13 *mar-ḫi-tum li-iḫ-ta-*⌜*ad-da-a-am*⌝ *i-na su-ni-*⌜*ka*⌝ 14 *an-na-ma ši-i*[*m-ti a-wi-lu-tim*$^{?}$]	**B**	οὐ γάρ μοι δηρὸν βέε᾽, ἀλλά τοι ἤδη ἄγχι παρέστηκεν θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή.

Despite the similarities, the two passages also present some other differences. In *Gilgameš* it is the hero who comes towards the female figure, while in the *Iliad* it is the female deity who approaches and first addresses the hero. Gilgameš is completely alone in his grief when he reaches Šiduri, whereas

Achilles is surrounded by his comrades while mourning Patroklos (*Il.* XXIV 123-124).[18] Šiduri's speech cites human mortality as a universal fate and develops this point extensively (OB VA + BM iii 1-5). Thetis' opening speech, on the contrary, refers much more concisely to Achilles' individual destiny of death (131-132),[19] much like in *Il.* I 413-418, where the goddess begins her reply to her outraged son's complaints as follows:[20]

τὸν δ᾽ ἠμείβετ᾽ ἔπειτα Θέτις κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσα·
ὤι μοι τέκνον ἐμόν, τί νύ σ᾽ ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα;
αἴθ᾽ ὄφελες παρὰ νηυσὶν ἀδάκρυτος καὶ ἀπήμων
ἧσθαι, ἐπεί νύ τοι αἶσα μίνυνθά περ, οὔ τι μάλα δήν.
νῦν δ᾽ ἅμα τ᾽ ὠκύμορος καὶ ὀϊζυρὸς περὶ πάντων
ἔπλεο· τώ σε κακῆι αἴσηι τέκον ἐν μεγάροισιν.

Then Thetis answered him, with tears flowing down:
"Ah me, my child, why did I, bitter in childbearing, raise you?
Would that you sat by your ships without tears, without pain,
for indeed your measure of life is so very small, not long at all.
And now you are at once short-lived and unlucky beyond all men;
so I bore you to an unworthy fate in my halls.

The pleasures recalled by Šiduri in the OB version of *Gilgameš* also entail the joy of family life, whereas in Thetis' speech in *Il.* XXIV pleasure is presented as an occasional satisfaction of biological needs.[21] In *Gilgameš* the hero is desperately looking for a way out of human mortality, whereas in the *Iliad* the hero is resigned to his finitude and seeks compensatory glory instead. These differences can be summarized in the following table:

DIFFERENCES	
Gilgameš	***Iliad***
The hero addresses the divine female figure	The divine female figure addresses the hero
The grieving hero travels alone	The grieving hero is surrounded by comrades
Šiduri's speech concerns mankind as a whole	Thetis' speech focuses on Achilles' mortal fate

18. The motif of a grieving figure surrounded by companions or relatives who is approached by a messenger occurs elsewhere in *Il.* XXIV: 83-86 (Thetis); 160-162 (Priam).
19. It is nevertheless remarkable that Thetis uses here the same words used by the dying Patroklos in foretelling to Hector his own death (*Il.* XVI 852-853). This belongs to a pattern of repetitions which ties together the fates of Achilles and Hector; cf. Macleod 1982, 44. However, Thetis as a character is only referring to Achilles's destiny here.
20. The parallel between the scenes in *Il.* I and *Il.* XXIV has been pointed out by Richardson 1993, 289.
21. Thetis' words also serve as a soothing introduction to Zeus' orders, which she is about to report to Achilles. Cf. Macleod 1982, 100.

Šiduri offers Gilgameš a model for life	Thetis offers Achilles circumstantial advice before reporting the message from Zeus

It is clear that both passages present the same basic structure while differences are confined to details and do not affect the substance of the parallel.

Shortly after the publication of the Old Babylonian manuscript by Bruno Meissner in 1902,[22] a parallel to the Biblical book of Qohelet was noted.[23] Qohelet 9:7-9 presents the same arguments of Šiduri's speech, and they are arranged in the same order.[24]

> 9:7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved what you do.
> 9:8 Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head.
> 9:9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.[25]

The parallel between this passage and Šiduri's speech lies exclusively in phraseology and themes. The framework of a divine female figure delivering a wisdom message on the seashore to a hero despairing over the death of his friend is absent in the book of Qohelet. We are therefore confronted with two different types of parallels: parallels in phraseology and parallels in dramatic action.

Given the structural and thematic similarities between Šiduri's speech and *Il.* XXIV, it seems likely that the *Iliad* was influenced by a Babylonian source, although it is not possible to determine how and when the transmission took place. Perhaps a further element of comparison is the function of the passages in the poems as turning points. In the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš*, Šiduri's speech serves as an existential revelation of the hero's human condition and fate. This role will be taken over by Ūta-napīšti in the Standard Babylonian version. In the *Iliad*, Thetis' words presage Achilles' sudden change of attitude (138-140) that will lead the poem to its conclusion by allowing Hector's body to return to Troy. Another element which might hint at a non-Greek background of the scene in the *Iliad* is the invitation to pleasure, which is not to be found in the other two scenes of messengers reaching mourning figures (Thetis and Priam) in *Il.* XXIV. As has been noted, all three of these episodes follow a stock-pattern,[26] but Thetis' exhortation to enjoy food and sex is not paralleled in the other two scenes.[27] Whether the parallel between Šiduri and Thetis is due to some sort of direct or mediated influence is hard to establish. If the *Gilgameš* epic was the ultimate source of both the Iliadic and Qohelet passages, it seems quite evident that Šiduri's speech reached the Biblical author and the

22. Meissner 1902.
23. Grimme 1905, see most recently Samet 2015b, 376-379.
24. For a chart comparing the two passages see Samet 2015b, 378.
25. The translation is taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
26. See Macleod 1982, 43-44. The stock pattern in these messenger-scenes serves as a preparation for both the plot and themes in the rest of the book, whose core is the meeting of Achilles and Priam.
27. Note also that in *Il.* XXIV 93-94, Thetis is veiled, as is Šiduri in Tablet X of the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgameš*.

Homeric poet through independent channels, as shown by the different nature of the two parallels. As argued by Samet, the Qohelet passage can be understood as "an actual literary dependence"[28] because the author was inspired by the content of Šiduri's speech and inserted her advice in the Biblical book almost verbatim, disregarding the whole scene from which it derived. On the contrary, we may suggest that the Homeric poet adapted the *Gilgameš* passage, preserving the structure of the whole scene.[29] In any case, the parallel between Šiduri and Thetis provides us with further evidence suggesting a relationship between *Gilgameš* and the *Iliad*.

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28. Samet 2015b, 379. On the influence of Mesopotamian literature on the book of Qohelet see for instance Lambert 1995; Klein 2000; Samet 2010; Samet 2015a; Samet 2015b; Cohen 2013, 149-150.
29. The parallel between Šiduri's speech and *Il.* XXIV seems to meet the four fundamental criteria gathered by Lardinois (2018, 900-901) for identifying the adaptation of a Near Eastern story or theme in Greek literature: (1) there is a reasonable correspondence between the Greek and the Near Eastern text; (2) it is possible that the story or theme was transmitted orally; (3) it is not part of an Indo-European tradition nor is it attributable to common human experience; (4) it is quite unique and therefore unlikely to have been fashioned independently. We may also add one of the supplementary criteria, namely the sixth, "it is found together with other adaptations from the Near East", if we consider the Mesopotamian influences on the *Iliad* at large and the other echoes of *Gilgameš* in *Il.* XXIV (e.g., Achilles' recounting his past deeds with Patroklos at 6-9 has been read in parallel with Gilgameš recalling his past adventures with Enkidu; cf. Di Benedetto 1998, 314 and 316).

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