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The ‘Song of Release’ Twenty-nine Years after its Discovery¹

Abstract

This paper deals with the important Hurrian literary composition ‘the Song of Release’. Its first tablet KBo 32.11 is discussed and a new interpretation of lines iv 13’–14’ is proposed. Further, the tradition of these texts and that of the so-called ‘Parables’ often associated with them is examined.

Keywords: Hurrians, Ebla, Hittites, Hurrian Literature, Song of Release

1.

The tablets of the ‘Song of Release’ were discovered during the excavations in the ‘Upper City’ of Ḫattuša in the years 1983–1985. Copies of these tablets appeared in 1990 in KBo 32, and in 1996 they were published in transliteration and translation with a rich commentary by E. Neu in StBoT 32. These texts have aroused the interest of numerous scholars from many points of view, mostly concerning the composition itself with its literary and historical significance and the Hurrian grammar and lexicon. I will not deal here with all the works that have appeared in the last 29 years, but will concentrate on those that are relevant in terms of defining the structure of the Song.

Wilhelm revised the sequence of some of the tablets of the composition in an article that appeared in 1997, showing that, differently than Neu’s proposal, KBo 32.19 precedes KBo 32.15, which is the fifth tablet. Moreover, KBo 32.20 could be the third tablet of the series. As a result of Wilhelm’s work the whole plot of the Song can be understood more clearly than before. In KBo 32.19 Teššob asks for the release of the slaves, whereupon Megi, the ruler of Ebla, refers a divine request to the assembly of the elders of Ebla. Thereafter, in KBo 32.15 the elders, represented by Zazalla, argue against this request, and the story moves towards its end.

¹ I thank Prof. Dr. Gernot Wilhelm and Prof. Dr. Mauro Giorgieri for having read the manuscript of this paper and for their helpful comments. The abbreviations used can be found in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* (RIA).

In 2001 Wilhelm published a German translation of the Song, establishing some further very important points for the comprehension of the Song. To summarize them briefly, KBo 32.37² and 10 might belong to the second tablet of the Song. This means that KBo 32.13, the text with the descent of Teššob into the underworld, cannot be the second tablet and the continuation of the proemium as was previously thought (e.g. Haas / Wegner 1991: 385–386; de Martino 2000: 301; Haas 2006: 180–182). As Wilhelm observes (2001: 83) there is neither a logical nor a narrative connection between the end of KBo 32.11 and the first lines of KBo 32.13. Moreover, KBo 32.37 and 10, in consideration of their content, seem to relate to the ensuing fourth and fifth tablets of the Song and to precede KBo 32.20, which is presumably the third tablet. That KBo 32.13 constitutes the mythological *aition* and thus explains the reason why Teššob requested the release of the slaves has been suggested by Haas and Wegner (1997: 442–443).³ Such a reconstruction – in which Teššob had been kept prisoner in the underworld before escaping, and having himself experienced such a pitiful condition eventually ordered the release of the prisoners captured by Ebla and kept in slavery – is contextually very attractive and is also supported by comparison with similar Mesopotamian literary compositions (Haas 2006: 181), but it presupposes that KBo 32.13 is to be placed at the beginning of the whole composition after the proemium.

Wilhelm (2009: 13–14) suggests an alternative hypothesis, according to which KBo 32.13 might conclude the Song, among other reasons because the colophon of the fifth tablet indicates that the composition does not end with KBo 32.15. According to Wilhelm, Teššob, angry with the people of Ebla because they had not fulfilled his request, became alienated from the land he had traditionally protected and went into hiding in the underworld. This part of the Song might be compared with the myths of the disappearing gods, documented by several Anatolian traditions and by many different texts (Hoffner 1998: 14–39).

In what follows I would like to suggest some further minor revisions that are implied by Wilhelm's new reconstruction of the Song or that result from my re-examination of the tablets and the secondary literature.

2.

The first tablet contains the proemium and introduces the *dramatis personae*, i.e. the deities Teššob, Allani and Išhara, a man named Pizigarra and the city of Ebla. It is preserved by KBo 32.11, which also contains the colophon, reading 'First tablet of the Song (sìr) of Release' (iv 22').

In the last lines of the fourth column of KBo 32.11 (12'–21') is a dialogue between Teššob and Išhara, where we read, 'Teššob said [to] Išhara the (following) words' (iv 12'–13'; following Haas / Wegner 1991: 385–386; 1997: 447–448). Lines 13'–14' are particularly difficult:

13' ... ša-a-ri-ib ša-a-ri(-)u-u[m[?]- ...]⁴
 14' [d]Iš-ḥa-a-ra ša-a-ri-ib ša-a-ri(-)[...]

² Differently, Haas / Wegner (1991: 386) believe that this fragment is the continuation of KBo 32.13 and that it refers to the episode where Teššob gains his freedom and can thus leave the underworld.

³ Haas (2006: 182) proposes that Teššob leaves the underworld after having left there a substitute.

⁴ Neu (1996: 31): ša-a-ri(-)u-u[m.

This passage has been translated, 'Er[?] wünscht(e), w[as^{??}] du wünschst. Išhara wünscht(e) [was^{??} er[?]] wünsch[t]' (Wilhelm 2001: 86; Haas 2006: 179). According to this interpretation *šar=i=b* would be a verbal form, 'he/she wishes', which is also documented, e.g., in KBo 32.15 i 5'. The second word, too, would be a verbal form, *šar=i=o=mma*, 'you wish'. This interpretation, however, presents two difficulties. First, it is not clear to whom the verbal form *šar=i=b*, 'he/she wishes', refers, since the subject subsequently switches to the second person. Second, *šar=i=o(=mma)* is an ergative verbal form, but there is no direct object in this sentence, unless it was expressed at the end of the line, which is broken.

I therefore wonder whether the two words repeated in these two lines might be explained differently. First, *ša-a-ri-ib* can be analyzed as *šar-i=v*, with *šar-i* as a noun meaning 'wish', derived from the verb *šar-*, 'to wish' (analogous, e.g. to *fur-i < fur-*; see e.g. Giorgieri 2000: 198), followed by the possessive pronoun *-v*, 'your'. It is true that a Hurrian word for 'wish' has been recognized in *šar=i=šše*, but a noun *šar-i* is documented also in KBo 32.31+208 obv. i 10 (*ša-a-ri-ne-wi*; *šari=ne=ve*), unfortunately in a fragmentary passage that does not allow one to determine if the meaning 'wish' fits the context. Moreover, a homophonous word for 'booty', *šar(r)i*, is documented in one of the Qatna letters (see lastly Wegner 2007: 239; Richter / Lange 2012, 194). In any case, if the suggestion should turn out to be correct, it would yield a *figura etymologica* with a noun and verb derived from the same verbal root, similar to those found, e.g., in the parables (see Haas / Wegner 2007: 535). Such a rhetorical expression might have been employed here in order to stress the importance of Išhara's wish, because, as we will see presently, it determines the events narrated in the Song. Admittedly this same *figura etymologica* is found in the fragment ChS-E 1 iv 15 as *šar=i=šše šar=i=mm(a)=an* (Giorgieri 2002: 116), i.e., with *šarišše* rather than *šari*, but it is possible that both expressions were used.

For the second word, *ša-a-ri(-)u-u[m²-...]*, two interpretations can be considered. First, *šar=i* might be the imperative of the verb *šar-*, 'to wish', and the sentence could be translated 'wish your wish!' This would yield an expression analogous to that found in ChS-E 1 iv 15. This hypothesis, however, is problematic, because the following two signs, U and UM, are written immediately following the preceding sign, suggesting that they belong together with *šar=i*; moreover, if they begin a new word, it is difficult to imagine what word one could integrate here. A second interpretation thus suggests itself, namely understanding *šar=i=o=mma* as 'you wish', i.e. an ergative form with *šar-i=v* as its direct object. According to this suggestion, and interpreting the word *šari* of l. 14 as an imperative, we can parse *šar-i=v šar=i=o=m[ma]* [d]Išhara *šar-i=v šar=i* [] and translate 'you wish your wish, o Išhara;⁵ wish your wish!'

Although the grammatical analysis and interpretation of these two lines remain very tentative, the suggested solution would imply that Teššob invites Išhara to tell him what her wish is, whereupon he promises in the following line (iv 15') to give her what she is asking for, i.e. *iž=až ar=ol=eva*, 'I shall give'.

Lines 16'–21' of the fourth column of KBo 32.11 preserve Išhara's answer: '[I]šhara [said to] Teššo[b] the (following) words' (Haas / Wegner 1991: 385–386). Unfortunately, the subsequent lines are very fragmentary and difficult to interpret (Wilhelm 2001: 86). Ebla is

⁵ I.e. as a vocative.

mentioned twice (iv 17', 20'); we find the verbal form *paḡ=ed=a*, 'he/she/it will destroy' (iv 18'), and two lines later we read the word *omin(i)=na*, 'the lands'; this is preceded by the obscure expression *pa-a-ḫu-ú-ma*, which might be connected to the verb *paḡ-*, 'to destroy', already mentioned (Neu 1996: 51).

The Song of Release presents or explains the fall of Ebla as seen by the people of a Hurrian city located somewhere close to it. Wilhelm (2008: 192–193) writes that 'the Ebla epic originally belonged to the tradition of the city of Igingalliš, because it tells the pathetic story of the slavery and liberation of the inhabitants of that city and it aggrandizes their leader Purra to mythical dimensions'. According to Wilhelm, the Song of Release might have been written down in a city where Hurrian was spoken, such as Ḫaššum.

Indeed, the 'Song of Release', as Wilhelm rightly shows, is not a celebrative tale of Ebla, but seeks to show that Ebla deserved its destruction. The elders of Ebla felt no pity for the slaves of Igingalliš and, what is worse, refused to fulfil Teššob's request. Thus, their hubris determined Ebla's ruin.

According to Wilhelm (2001: 85) Išḫara might have been the protective deity of Igingalliš, and if so, it may have been this deity who asked Teššob for the release of the people of her city, who had been captured by Ebla. Alternatively, since it is known that Išḫara played an important role in the pantheon of Ebla from ancient times (Archi 1992: 9–10), she might have asked Teššob for the military and political supremacy of Ebla. This might have been the content of the already quoted passage KBo 32.11 iv 16'–21', unfortunately very fragmentary, in which Ebla is mentioned twice and the verb 'to destroy' and 'the lands' appear. Teššob might have declared that he would fulfil Išḫara's request on condition that Ebla free its slaves, thus demonstrating a degree of empathy, and in fact we read in the fourth tablet of the Song (KBo 32.19 i/ii 11–19) that Teššob promises Megi that Ebla will overwhelm its enemies and be a famous and celebrated city if the ruler of Ebla releases the slaves. Thus, Ebla could have become an even more powerful city, but its elders refused to submit to Teššob's will, their arrogance and political blindness even leading to the fall of the city.

Teššob's request that the slaves be released is thus not a consequence of his former imprisonment in the underworld, but only a narrative device that brings the plot of the composition to its dramatic end; in fact, the refusal of his request causes the deity's anger and the consequent sudden fall of Ebla. At the same time this narrative structure also reveals the ineptitude of the elders who ruled Ebla, thus constituting a sort of revenge for those who might really have suffered from Ebla's aggressive policy, i.e., the people of Igingalliš.

3.

The narration preserved by KBo 32.19, the fourth tablet of the Song, is documented by several manuscripts:

<i>Manuscript</i>	<i>Find Spot</i>
KBo 32.19	T. 16
KBo 32.21 // 20 iv 15'–17' (III tablet); 19 i 1–4	T. 16
KBo 32.22 // 19 ii 1–8	T. 15
KBo 32.24+216 ii 1'–19' // 19 ii 14–33	T. 15
KBo 32.27 // 19 ii 21–25 or iii 46'–51'	T. 16
KBo 32.29 // 19 ii 22–31	T. 16
KBo 32.30 // 19 iii 45'–50'	T. 16
KBo 32.35 // 24+216 iii 9'–12'	T. 15
KBo 32.214 // 19 i 24–33 or iv 49'–51' ^{(?)6}	T. 15
KBo 32.107 // 214 i 8'–10'	T. 16

The fifth tablet of the Song is likewise documented by several manuscripts, i.e., KBo 32.16 and KBo 32.15 with duplicates:

<i>Manuscript</i>	<i>Find Spot</i>
KBo 32.16	T. 15
KBo 32.15 i 1'–2', ii 2ff. // 16 i 14–15, ii 16 ff.	T. 16
KBo 32.52 // 15 ii 13'–15'	T. 16
KBo 32.56 // 15 i 1'–2'	T. 16
KBo 32.60(+ ^{?)} 57 // 16 iii 5'–10'	T. 16
KBo 32.58 // 15 i 10'–15'	T. 16
KBo 32.59 // 16 ii 1–6	T. 16
KBo 32.60 // 16 iii 5'–7'	T. 16
KBo 32.79 // 15 i 4'–6'	T. 16

⁶ According to Neu (1993: 114–116; 1996: 550) the Hurrian fragment KBo 32.214 i 1'–6' duplicates KBo 32.19 i 24–33, although lines 8'–11' of KBo 32.214 present a text completely different from the following lines of KBo 32.19 (i 35ff.), which might have been omitted in KBo 32.214. In fact, KBo 32.214 i 1'–6' correspond exactly to KBo 32.19 i 24–33, where Teššob says that he will destroy the wall of Ebla's lower and upper city if it does not free Purra and the other slaves. In KBo 32.19 i 35–39 Teššob adds that he will move the hearth of the lower wall down to the river and that of the upper wall down to the lower wall, the latter part of which does not appear in KBo 32.214. Thus, KBo 32.214 i 1'–2' might duplicate the last three lines of the fourth column of KBo 32.19 (iv 49'–51'), i.e., the part where Megi

As we can see, the part of the tale corresponding to the fourth and fifth tablets has been copied several times, most of the tablets coming from Temple 16, some others from Temple 15.

Other parts of the Song, in contrast, such as the proemium and the narrative of the descent of Teššob into the underworld, have survived in only one copy. The proemium, e.g., is documented only by the tablet KBo 32.11, though Neu (1996: 41) suggested that the Hittite right column of KBo 32.32 might belong to it as well. In the two lines following the mention of Pizigarra in this fragment is found the Hittite verbal form *ḫarnikta*, ‘he destroyed’ (KBo 32.32 r. col. 4’, 5’). Although KBo 32.32 does not join KBo 32.11, Neu (1996: 30–31, 42) connected this Hittite passage to the Hurrian text KBo 32.11, where he read *paḫ[é-* (i 8), i.e., the beginning of the Hurrian verb *pağ-*, ‘to destroy’, assuming that KBo 32.32 might translate the corresponding lines of KBo 32.11. Wilhelm (2001: 85), in his German translation of the Song, rejects the reading *pa-ḫ[é-* at the end of KBo 32.11 i 8, because the last readable sign is I, not ḪE, depriving KBo 32.32 of its only link with the proemium.⁷

Haas and Wegner (1991: 386) have also proposed that KBo 32.72 might belong to the same composition as KBo 32.13, since the ‘dark earth’ is mentioned in r. col. 4; and Neu (1996: 526) suggested that KBo 32.65 might be part of the narrative of KBo 32.13 due to the presence of the word ‘wine’ (GEŠTIN-*it*, r. col. 2’). Both, however, are cases of very small fragments that prohibit certain conclusions.

I wonder whether the fact that only the part of the Song corresponding to the fourth and fifth tablets has survived in several manuscripts is due to mere chance. It may be the case that only two or three sets of tablets of the whole Song of Release were kept in Temples 15 and 16, while the part of the tale relating the debate among the elders of Ebla was copied multiple times. This would suggest that this part of the narrative aroused

presents Teššob’s request to the elders of Ebla. If so, Megi, when presenting Teššob’s request to the elders of Ebla, would omit the latter part of the god’s speech, i.e., the part found in KBo 32.19 i 35–39. In fact, the passage KBo 32.214 i 7’–11’ (see also KBo 32.107 l. col. 1’–3’), unfortunately very fragmentary, seems to contain a different topic, though mentioning the assembly of the elders (of Ebla), as in KBo 32.214 i 8’ and 10’ (*alžialli*) and ‘the elders’ (*kevirra*, i.e. *kev=i=r(i)=ra(<na)*) in 9’. KBo 32.214, which belongs to a different set of tablets, might overlap the last lines of KBo 32.19 and the beginning of the narration preserved in KBo 32.16.

⁷ According to Neu (1996: 42), the quoted passages of KBo 32.11 and KBo 32.32 might show that Pizigarra wanted to attack Ebla, but was unable to do so, leading to Teššob doing it himself. Archi (2001; 2007: 189) followed Neu’s reading of KBo 32.11 i 8 and assumed that Ebla has been destroyed by a group of Hurrians led by Pizigarra, adding that it remains unclear how this conquest could be related to the expeditions against Syria led by the Hittite kings Ḫattušili I and Muršili I. Matthiae (2010: 223–224) went a step further, suggesting that Muršili I would have entered into an alliance with the easternmost Hurrian principalities, such as that ruled by Pizigarra of Niniveh, with the aim of receiving their help in his two main conquests, that of Ebla and that of Babylon. Since, as noted, both passages are fragmentary, the exact role of Pizigarra remains uncertain, although his appearance in the proemium clearly shows that he must have played an important role. It can naturally not be ruled out that Ebla may have been attacked by the Hittites together with some eastern Hurrian ruler such as Pizigarra, and in fact, some degree of cooperation between the Hittites and some of the easternmost Hurrian potentates is demonstrated by other documents, such as the Tigonani letter (de Martino 2002).

greater interest than the rest, though the reasons for such interest are unknown. Was it appreciated because it preserved beautiful examples of rhetorical ability, such as the speeches of Teššob and Zazalla? Or was it the paradox of Teššob, poor, hungry and requiring help, that intrigued the reader?

4.

As Wilhelm (1997: 292–293; 2001: 84) has shown, the parables do not belong to the Song of Release,⁸ and the very fragmentary colophon of KBo 32.12 iv 23' does not preserve the expression *para tarnumaš*. The parables are documented by several tablets:

<i>Manuscript</i>	<i>Find Spot</i>
KBo 32.12 (colophon: II tablet)	T. 16
KBo 32.14	T. 16
KBo 32.36	T. 15
KBo 32.44	T. 16
KBo 32.47a(+ ³)47b(+ ²)47c ⁹	T. 16
KBo 32.48	T. 16
KBo 32.49	T. 16
KBo 32.50	T. 16
KBo 32.51	T. 16
KBo 32.77	T. 16
KBo 32.88	T. 16

No duplicates have been recognized among these tablets; however, a comparison of all the texts reveals some editorial differences that lead one to suppose, despite their common narrative structure, that they do not belong to only one set of tablets. For example, KBo 32.12 ends with a colophon labelling it as the second tablet, while KBo 32.14, which is a complete tablet, has no colophon; and between the last line of a parable and the transitional phrase 'leave that story, I'll tell you another story ...' in KBo 32.48 r. col. 4'–5' there is no paragraph line, as found in the other similar texts. Moreover, one fragment of the parables (KBo 32.36) does not come from Temple 16, but from Temple 15, and therefore it might belong to another set of tablets. All these tablets are part of a broad collection of texts of the same literary genre, which had been gathered together and were considered of a certain interest; nevertheless they seem to have existed in only a single copy.¹⁰

⁸ Differently Haas (2006: 187).

⁹ According to Neu (1996: 514) these fragments could belong to KBo 32.12.

¹⁰ On the nature of the Hittite tablet collections at Hattusa see van den Hout (2005).

5.1.

A further fragment of the Song of Release was recently published by Akdoğan as ABoT 2.247 (2011). The mention of both Megi (l. 2')¹¹ and Zazalla (l. 3'), two personages who play important roles in the Song, suggest that it belongs to the composition. Megi and Zazalla are mentioned in proximity to one another in KBo 32.16 ii 11 and KBo 32.15 iii 15–16, iv 17–18, but neither of these two passages duplicates ABoT 2.247.

Soyсал observes in the catalogue of ABoT 2 (p. 30) that the script of this fragment seems to be New Hittite (as shown by the sign DA in l. 5'. Although any chronological considerations based on this fragment must remain quite tentative, as it preserves only very few signs, it could potentially be the only fragment belonging to a different and later tradition of the Song of Release. Unfortunately, no provenience is known for this tablet, and it therefore remains unknown if it might have been stored in Temple 15 or 16 together with the other tablets of the Song.

5.2.

Otten and Rüster published as KBo 31.169 (2000) a fragment of a tablet containing a votive text (CTH 590). Here a person, whose identity is unknown because the first two lines of the paragraph are fragmentary, says that he/she will perform two festivals for the deity in the city of Ušša, one of which is the 'Festival of Release', EZEN₄ *para tarnumaš* (obv. i 4'). Since at the beginning of the following paragraph the queen (MUNUS.LUGAL, obv. i 9') is mentioned in connection with the cult of Ištar in Ušša, it may be supposed that the preceding paragraph also refers to the queen. Ušša is in fact the place where Muršili III is known to have made a vow, as documented by KUB 54.70 obv. 3'–4' (Lebrun 1976: 211). Moreover, both the king and the queen are said to have had dreams in Ušša: in KUB 56.22, 3'–8' the king dreams that a god will give him Egypt (de Roos 2007: 258–259; Mouton 2007: 256); and in KUB 48.118, 1–18 the queen, presumably Puduḫeba, has a dream, the content of which is difficult to understand (de Roos 2007: 123–124; Mouton 2007: 270–272). Since all known votive texts date to the 13th century (de Roos 2007: 30), it can be assumed that also KBo 31.169 dates to this time as well, and since the most active and most frequently mentioned queen of this century is Puduḫeba, it may be supposed that she is the queen at issue.

KBo 31.169 therefore attests to the performance of a 'Festival of Release' in the 13th century. It is not known whether there was a connection between this festival and the Hurrian composition of the Song of Release, and if so, what it might have been. Ebla was a long forgotten city in the 13th century, and such a festival might therefore refer to some tradition other than that documented by the extant tablets of the Song. Alternatively, one might suppose that the Hurrian revival promoted by Puduḫeba brought with it a renewed interest in the Middle Hittite tablets of the Song of Release.

¹¹ Differently Akdoğan (2010: 124), who reads *x-me-gi-x*].

5.3.

Finally, in KBo 57.180 (2007), a fragment of a New Hittite festival tablet,]-*nu-ma-aš* šir s[IR-*RU* is found in l. 4'. Miller (2007: IX–X) wonders if the partially broken word might be restored as *pa-ra-a tar*]-*nu-ma-aš*, since this is the only known song title ending in *-umaš*. As he writes, this might suggest that the Song of Release, or some part of it, would have been sung during a cult festival. It is known that Hurrian mythological texts were used when performing rituals, as is attested, e.g., for the 'Song of the Sea', sung during the festival for the mountain Ḫazzi (Rutherford 2001; Lorenz / Rieken 2010: 229–230; Gilan 2011: 100).

These recently published texts add new and important information to our understanding of the Song of Release. The fragment ABoT 2.247 places the Ebla tale and its tradition in the Imperial Age in a new perspective, and the two attestations from KBo 31.169 and KBo 57.180 suggest, although at the moment only tentatively, that such a composition might have been in some way connected to a cult festival during the 13th century.

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