

“This man is an ass!” Maledicta in Akkadian

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Maledicta (insults) occur in Akkadian (Babylonian-Assyrian) letters, literary text genres, royal inscriptions and lexical texts. A semantic typology of Akkadian maledicta distinguishes the following groups: animals, sexual and scatological maledicta; maledicta referring to dirt, physical or mental handicaps, to an unknown or bad origin, to the abandonment by god; maledicta designating a person as deceiver, denunciator, chatterer, criminal or evildoer. Maledicta are a source for the Mesopotamian canon of values.

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1. Maledicta and cuneiform text genres

Around 1770 B.C., Bannum was annoyed about the diviner Asqūdum. Both were officials in the kingdom of Mari on the middle Euphrates River in what is now Syria. Bannum addressed a letter, written in cuneiform script and in Akkadian (Babylonian-Assyrian) language, to Zimri-Lim, the king of Mari:

Asqūdum kišid qātija lā šināti ina libbišu šabitma wardi ša ana šir bēlija u mār(ū) Sim'al lā tamarrašu ana tēretim t[aš]akkan āmur kima awilum šū ana lemuntim uzunšu šaknatma lā šināti ina idat lemuntim [m] itti bēlija idabbubma ... kima awilum šū ana ēkallim parākim lā'iju awilam šāti bēli lā ihaššihšu awilum šū šu-uḥ-ḥu ARM 26/1, 5 = 33, 61: 28–45

“Asqūdum for whom I am responsible has impropriety in his heart. You shall appoint servants to offices who do not cause grief to my lord and the Sim'al! I have seen that this man plans evil, and he speaks unseemly things with evil intentions to my lord ... Because this man is able to erect obstacles for the palace, my lord shall not rely on this man! This man is an ass!”

The word *šuhḥu* is one of the words for “butt” in Akkadian.² Note the rhetorical intensification in Bannum’s tirade: he begins with “unseemly,” then

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2 Heimpel (2003, 177), and Durand (2019, 164) leave the word untranslated, although the last editor in his commentary already points to the word *šuhḥu* “Gesäß, Untersatz” (AHw. 1261), “buttocks” (CAD Š/3, 206) or the verb *šuhḥū* “schwängern” (AHw. 1261), “to have (illicit) intercourse” (CAD Š/3, 207), perhaps derived from it. Instead of the

speaks of “evil” and “evil intent”, and finally uses the expletive *šuhhu*. Bannum is not squeamish in other ways either. In the same letter, he writes about another official that he would “grow fat like a pig so that you can slaughter him” (*kīma šaḥīm ikabbiruma taṭabbahušu* *ibid.* 24f.).

The communicative situation of letters, a frequent cuneiform text genre in Mesopotamia, predestines them for maledicta of all kinds. The second text genre in which maledicta occasionally occur are literary texts in which dialogues are embedded. When Gilgameš and his companion Enkidu confront the monster *Ḫumbaba* in the cedar forest, the latter snubs them:

limtalkū lillu Gilgameš nuʾû amēlu minâ tall[ikā] adi 'maḥrija' alka Enkidu mār nūni ša lā idū abāšu atam raqqu u šelep̄p̄i ša lā iniqu šizib ummišu ina šehērika adaggalkama ul aqerrub(u)ka [ul? a]d?-da-ku-ka-a ultabbâ ina karšija George (2003, 606) V 86–90

“Let the fool Gilgameš (and) the stupid think: Why have you come to me? Come, Enkidu, son of a fish, who does not know his father, young of a tortoise or a turtle, who never sucked his mother’s milk, I look at you, you pipsqueak, but I do not approach you. [Will I]not crush(?) you, satisfy myself in my belly (on you)?”³

The monster insults Gilgameš and Enkidu as idiots because of their foolhardiness. The animal metaphors aim at the parentless origin of Enkidu, the creature of the steppe.

Royal inscriptions love to insult the king’s enemies.⁴ The following example is found in an inscription of the Neo-Assyrian king *Sîn-aḥḥē-eriba*:

arki Šūzubu isseḥuma mārū Babilī gallū lemnūti abullāt āli uddilū ikpud libbašunu ana epēš tuqumti Šūzubu Kaldāja eḫlum dunnamū ša lā išū birkī ardu dāḡil pān pāḥat Laḥiri Arame ḥalqu munnabtu āmir damē ḥabbilu šēruššu ipḥurūma Grayson and Novotny (2012, 181) v 17–23

“After Šūzubu had rebelled and the Babylonians, evil demons, had locked the city gates, they planned to wage a battle. The Chaldean Šūzubu, a feeble, impotent (literally: who has no knees)⁵ man, a slave who had served before the governor of Laḥiri – the Arameans – runaways, fugitives, bloodthirsty, evildoers – gathered around him.”

The Babylonians are demons, Šūzubu an impotent slave, and the Arameans criminals.

stative, a nonverbal phrase with a noun in the status rectus nominative is used, a construction that sometimes occurs (Streck 2021, § 328d; Streck 2022, § 5.193d).

3 My interpretation of the passage differs in part from that in George (2003, 607), see Streck (2007, 414, ad ll. 86, 89 and 90). However, I now derive the verbal form [a]d?-da-ku-ka-a from *dakāku* instead of *dāku*.

4 Fales (1987).

5 Cf. CAD B 257 *birku* 3a. I see no base for the translation “coward” by Grayson and Novotny, *ibid.* 181.

Finally, also lexical texts used for scribal training contain maledicta. For example, the Old Babylonian bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian list BT 9 (Klein 2003), which lists maledicta aimed at women, belongs to the context of Sumerian disputes between women,⁶ a text genre which also forms part of the scribal curriculum of the time.⁷ Another example comes from the lexical list Lu (MSL 12, 201), which contains designations for persons:

11	<i>ḥummurum</i>	“cripple”
12	<i>tubbukum</i>	“limper(?)”
13	<i>ṣubbutum</i>	“lame”
14	<i>lillum</i>	“fool”
15	<i>alli'āja</i>	“slurring(?)”
16	<i>ša rupuštašu iṣarruru</i>	“shithead (literally, whose poop flows)”
17	<i>munappiḫu</i>	“blower (one who spreads misinformation)”
18	<i>mudiṣṣu</i>	“deceiver”
19	<i>munangirum</i>	“denunciator”
20	<i>zā'irum</i>	“enemy”

This lexical text, only presented here in part, lists physical and mental handicaps as well as expressions for persons with immoral and undesirable behavior. At least some of these words serve a dual purpose: they describe people more or less neutrally and are used as maledicta in other situations.

6 Matuszak (2021).

7 Klein (2003). With Civil (*ibid.*, 137), all maledicta in this text refer to women.

2. Typology of Akkadian maledicta

In contrast to the extensive compilation by Mayer (2013),⁸ the following typology⁹ is based on a stricter definition of maledicta, as suggested, e.g., by the entry “insult” in the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries: “a remark or an action that is said or done in order to offend somebody”.¹⁰ I confine myself to characteristic examples without aiming at completeness. Maledicta directed to women are marked by “f”.

2.1. Animals

OB *minum šun[uma] kalbū* ARM 1, 27: 28 “What [are] they? Dogs!”

NB *Aḥlamū u kalbu iltēn ša sar[ri]* OIP 114, 109: 19 “an Aramean or a dog of a cri[minal].”¹¹

OB *kalbum dalḥum* Klein 2003, 11 “mad dog” (f).

NA *kalbi mēti anāku* SAA 16, 127 r. 15 “I am a dead dog” (self-insult).¹²

OB *agāl awâtīm* Klein 2003, 18 “word donkey,” i.e., chatterbox (f).

OB *kurkuzan lū tātakkal ribiṣ* CUSAS 10, 14: 6 “Piglet, all the time you have been (just) eating, lie down!” (to a young scribe).

OB *kīma kurkuzannim tulē libbika tēniq* CUSAS 10, 14: 21 “Like a piglet you sucked the breast of your womb” (to a young scribe).

OB *šaḥū* “pig” (see § 1, above).

OB *bēli attama lū labbu nakir[ūka] šunu lū šēlebūma* MesCiv. 7, 184: 18 “My Lord, you are truly a lion. [Your] enemies, they are truly foxes” (equivalent to our scared rabbit).

OB *šērim ḥuppudim* ARM 26/1 p. 428 no. 491: 15 “blindworm” (said of the king of Ešnunna).

8 Mayer lists all kinds of phrases that contain reproaches, complaints, rebukes, and the like. According to the above definition, a statement such as “After I left, you treated the city as you saw fit” (Mayer 2013, 254) is not a maledictum but a reproach. Moreover, in many cases cited by Mayer, there is neither an insult nor a reproach, complaint, or censure, e.g., “If there is no attack by robbers, let them come to me” AbB 14, 81: 19 (Mayer 2013, 25): this is rather a neutral description of the situation. The word “witch” (Mayer 2013, 255) does not belong here because the writers of the relevant letters are convinced of the actual existence of “witches” and do not use the word *kaššāptu* as a maledictum. The animal metaphors in MVAeG 21, 92–94 (cf. Mayer 2013, 265) are not insults to the Elamite king, but illustrate the fact that an Elamite ruler cannot sit on the Babylonian throne: e.g., in “can the dog that gnaws the bones be favorable to the m[ungo]?” (MVAeG 21, 95: 13), the word “mungo” does not insult the Elamite king, for it would follow that Babylon would be the “dog”. Rather, the two animal metaphors express the incompatibility of the two. Nevertheless, I owe many examples mentioned in the following to the compilation of Mayer.

9 See Streck (2010) for a more concise typology.

10 <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>, accessed July 24th, 2023.

11 Restore *sa[rrī]* (Mayer 2013, 264).

12 Many other references in CAD K 72 *kalbu* j.

NA *ana minimma* PN *ēpuš muk kabsu raddīu šū* SAA 16, 5 r. 6 “Why did PN do this? I say he is a ram that trots behind!”

2.2. Sexual maledicta

OB *ḥarimti* Matuszak 2021, 282: 181 “my whore” (f).

OB *qinnati ḥarimāt[i]* Klein 2003, 1 “whore’s ass” (f).

OB *muttaprirtum* Klein 2003, 12 “prowler” (f, allusion to sexual permissiveness).¹³

OB *muttazzizat rebīātīm musaḥḥirat sūqātīm* Matuszak 2021, 276 110f. “who is constantly standing around in the squares, prowling in the alleys” (f).

OB ¹*alpum* *mušamšū* Klein 2003, 3 “ox prowling in the night” (f, allusion to sexual permissiveness).

SB *tappê* PN *niku* SAA 3, 29: 4 “fucking comrade of PN”.

SB *ḥibtu niku* SAA 3, 30: 1 “fucking robbery(?)”.

SB *ziqnu nikātīm* SAA 3, 30: 4 “beard (i.e., pubic hair) of the fucked (women).”

SB *amtu amiltu* SAA 3, 30: 4 “servant, slave” (said of a man).

SB *eṭlum dunnamû ša lā išū birki* “a weak, impotent man” (see § 1, above).

2.3. Scatological maledicta

OB *itezzi illak* Klein 2003, 13 “She shits and leaves” (f).

OB *šarratītum* Klein 2003, 14 “farther” (f).

SB *šarrite* SAA 3, 29 r. 4 “farther”.

OB *šuburrum naksum* Klein 2003, 15 “cut off (= flat?) buttocks” (f).

SB *išpik zê (šarritim)* SAA 3, 29: 4; 30: 2 “dung bucket (of a farther).”¹⁴

OB *šuḥḥu* “ass” (see § 1, above).

OB *ša rupuštašu iṣarruru* “shithead” (see § 1, above).

2.4. Dirt

OB *muḥammitat ḥāmī* Klein 2003, 2 “garbage collector” (f).

2.5. Physical handicaps

OB *atta ḥummurum tašapparnêt[i]* ARM 26/2 p. 491 no. 519: 14 “You, a cripple, want to command us?”¹⁵

OB *šumēlūtum* Klein 2003, 10 “left-handed” (f).

SB *maḥḥu akī šināma* SAA 3, 30: 1 “double bloated one”.

SB *biṣu akī šināma* SAA 3, 30: 1 “double goggle-eyed”.

NA *ḥummur* SAA 18, 180 r. 6 “cripple” (king of Elam).

13 Klein (2003, 146) understands the expression as a “sarcastic insult” in contrast to expressions for “lame” and the like.

14 Mayer (2013, 257) reads *išpikku šarritim* “bucket of a fart”.

15 According to Durand (2019, 492), it is not excluded that “cripple” here means an actual physical disability.

OB *ḥummurum* “cripple”, *tubbukum* “limp(?)”, *ṣubbutum* “lame” (see § 1, above).

2.6. Mental handicaps

OB *awāt* PN *lil qāt 'ilim?*¹ *elišu tēmšu maqit awātišu ul idē u niš ilim ša izakkaru ul idē kima ša ina šuttišu niš ilim izakkaru ina ša lillu u tēmšu 'maqtu*¹ Eidem and Læssøe (2001, no. 4: 5–12) “The word of PN is foolish. The hand of god(?) is upon him. His mind is gone (literally, is fallen). He does not know what he says and he does not know the oath of god he swears, as if he swears the oath of god (only) in his dream. Since he¹⁶ is a fool and his mind is gone, ...”

OB *tēmum maqtum iqbēkkimma ... ana awāt tēmim maqti lā taqullī* OBTRimah 20: 15–23 “One without understanding (literally, a fallen mind) has spoken to you ... Pay no attention to the words of one without understanding!”

SB *lā tēmān[ī lā l]ē'e* SAA 3, 29 r. 6 “who is incomprehensible, incompetent”. SB *lillu* “fool” *nu'ū amēlu* “stupid”, *alli'āja* “slurring(?)” (see § 1, above).

2.7. Of unknown or bad origin

SB *mār bā'iri šaplum* SAA 3, 29: 3 “lowly fisherman’s son”.

SB *qinnu šapiltu* SAA 3, 30: 3 “(of) low family”.

SB *bītu ša kakkabša ina šamē ḥalqu* SAA 3, 30: 3 “(from) a house whose star has disappeared from the sky”.

NB *mār lā mam[mana] anāku* ABL 521: 6 “I am the son of a no[body]” (self-insult).

SB *mār nūni ša lā idū abāšu atam raqqu u šelep̄p̄i ša lā iniqu šizib ummišu* “son of a fish who does not know his father, young of a tortoise or turtle who has never sucked his mother’s milk” (see § 1, above).

SB *ardu* “slave” (see § 1, above).

2.8. Abandoned by the gods

SB *ardu ša ili [m]te* SAA 3, 30: 3 “servant of a dead god”.

NB *sikipti Bēl arrat ilī* ABL 460: 14 “rejected by Bēl, cursed by the gods”.¹⁷

2.9. Deceiver, denunciator, chatterer

OB *muqalliltum* Klein (2003, 8) “who defames” (f).

OB *mušqallilat ramaniša* Klein (2003, 9) “who harms her own reputation” (f).

OB *rigmum marrum* Klein (2003, 6) “bitter cry” (f, i.e., who defames).

OB *muḥabbirtum* Klein (2003, 20) “noisemaker” (f).¹⁸

OB *muttaššibat askuppāt awilē bīt awilim mālakšu tammadīma* Matuszak 2021, 276: 111f. “Who constantly sits around on people’s thresholds, you know what goes on in a man’s house” (curious(?), f).

16 On the reading *ina ša* see Mayer (2013, 251).

17 Further references CAD S 245 *sikiptu* 1.

18 Interpretation according to Mayer (2013, 260).

SB *šārānu* SAA 3, 29: 4 “empty talker”.

OB *munappiḫu* “blower”, *mudiššu* “deceiver”, *munangirum* “denunciator” (see § 1, above).

2.10. Criminal, evildoer

OB *sarrum anu*[*mmûm*] Eidem and Læssøe (2001, no. 2: 6) “th[at] evildoer” (said of the hostile king).

OB *u atta kima ḥābilim bīti tuḥallaq* CUSAS 36, 39: 7 “You ruin my house like a criminal”.

OB *sarti sinnišātim* Klein (2003, 7) “criminal among women” (f).

NA *parrišūtu šākirūtu* SAA 1, 154: 8f. “drunken hoodlums” (of marauding troops).

SB *ḥabbātum šarrāqu āmir* [*damē*] RINAP 4, 51 ii 4 “robbers, thieves, blood[thirsty]” (Assyrians).

NA PN *bēl ḥiṭu šū parrišu šū* SAA 5, 210: 16f. “PN is a criminal, a drunkard”.

OB *zā’irum* “enemy” (see § 1, above).

SB *gallû lemnūti* “evil demons” (see § 1, above).

SB *ḥalqu munnabtu āmir damē ḥabbilu* “runaways, fugitives, bloodthirsty, evildoers” (see § 1, above).

3. Maledicta and the Mesopotamian canon of values

Beyond their entertainment value, maledicta provide information about the Mesopotamian canon of values. Sexual and scatological maledicta and those referring to dirt concern universal taboos. The majority of documented sexual maledicta in Akkadian aim at women. This reflects their lack of sexual permissiveness in Mesopotamian society. Maledicta referring to physical and mental handicaps are also common in many cultures. They show the problematic social position of the persons concerned.

Maledicta such as “criminal” come from the sphere of law. Lawbreakers, of course, were not respected in Mesopotamia either. The same applies to bad, false, defaming or meaningless speech.

In Mesopotamia, origin often determined success or non-success in life. To be of unknown or low origin was a stigma. Conspicuously absent, however, are maledicta referring to foreign origin, such as English “dago”, German “Kanake” etc. This probably reflects the cosmopolitan character of Mesopotamian society, at least in the cities. To a certain degree, Mesopotamia was familiar with foreigners.

In a society steeped in religion, abandonment by god was a bad sign. Maledicta referring to animals are also universal. Because of the close relationship between humans and animals, however, their role in Mesopotamia is modest. Only the dog occurs more often, mostly as an image of submissiveness, while the evidence for other animals is meagre. With very

few exceptions, the stupid sheep, the foolish camel, or the dirty pig are absent. This fits with the observation that (animal) comparisons and metaphors in Akkadian literature usually do not evaluate, but only illustrate.¹⁹

4. Conclusion

The author of this article hopes that the preceding observations on Akkadian maledicta will not be judged like the venus observations of the Neo-Assyrian astrologer by his colleague Nabû-aḥḥē-erība:

NA [ša a]na šarre bēlija išpur[anni] [mā] Dilbat namrat [ina Add]ari namrat qallulu sakkuku parrīšu šū [ša] ana šarre bēlija išpur[anni mā] Dilbat ina libbe ag[rīm ...] namrat lā kētt[u šī] Dilbat udi[na lā in]nammar ... atâ mannu in[a muḥḥe ī]ssanalli ipaḥḥiz [šumm]a lā udda [lū] qāla SAA 10, 72: 9f.

“[Whoever] wrote to the king, my lord: ‘Venus is visible, [in the month of Ad]dar she is visible’, he is a wretch, a fool, an imposter. [(And) who [has] written to the king, my lord, ‘Venus is visible in the constellation of hir[eling (i.e., Aries)’ – [that] is not the truth! So far Venus is [not] visible ... Why does one constantly tell nonsense and is arrogant? [If] he knows (nothing), [he should] keep silent!”

Literature

Primary sources²⁰

ABL	Assyrian and Babylonian Letters.
ARM	Archives Royales de Mari.
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology.
MesCiv.	Mesopotamian Civilizations.
MSL	Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon.
OBTRimah	Old Babylonian Texts from Tell al Rimah.
OIP	Oriental Institute Publications.
RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Periods.
SAA	State Archives of Assyria.

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19 Streck (1999, 192).

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