Studia Humaniora Tartuensia

REVIEWS

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Buckley, Jorunn Jacobsen (2007) *Drower's Folk-Tales of Iraq.* Piscataway: Gorgias Press. XXIV, 485 p. ISBN 978-1-59333-360-7.

This book is the new edition of Lady E. S. Drower's (1879–1972) *Folk-Tales of Iraq*, originally published in 1931. The Gorgias Press has made a great service by publishing the 1931 tales as well as previously unpublished tales which were in the original manuscript. Thus we now have the complete set of folkloric texts, which about 80 years ago Lady Drower gathered in Iraq, translated, and intended to publish. The new edition contains about 180 pages of previously unknown material, and the time is ripe to take a fresh look at these folk-tales. In the following pages, the international tale type numbers are referred to according to the classification system in ATU.[1]

I believe that in this case the folklore preserves much of the old intellectual traditions of the region. The myths of ancient Mesopotamia seldom have been the subject of comparative folkloristic research. Few Assyriologists read fairy-tales and even fewer are ready to analyze them, as H. Vanstiphout did in his paper on the popular Iraqi folk-tale "Story of Shamshum al-Jabbar," reading it from the first edition of Drower's book (pp. 30–35). He observed that some motifs with obvious ancient ancestry in the Sumerian and Akkadian literature are recombined into a coherent plot in this tale. He also pointed out the way in which the ancient motifs – which he sorted – create a cohesive thrust to the modern story as a whole, and this is of great relevance for literary history.[2]

Allow me to give just two examples that demonstrate the importance of the material in Drower's book. The first one is the set of motifs, which are associated with the "Eagle and Serpent Tree." This widely known motif of a (cosmic) tree, the roots of which are inhabited by a snake and its top branches by an eagle, is mostly known from the Akkadian Etana myth, but it makes its first appearance in the Sumerian tale of "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld."[3] Lines 27–28 of that composition read: "At that time, there was a single tree, a single *halub* tree, a single tree, growing on the bank of the pure Euphrates, being watered by the Euphrates." After being uprooted and transplanted into Inana's garden, the tree grew tall:

> "Five years, 10 years went by, the tree grew massive; its bark, however, did not split. At its roots, a snake immune to incantations made itself a nest. In its branches, the

[1] See H.-J. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography*. Parts I–III. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 2004.

[2] H. L. J. Vanstiphout, "Shamshum aj-Jabbar: on the Persistence of Mesopotamian Literary Motifs," in: W. H. van Soldt, J. G. Dercksen, N. J. C. Kouwenberg & Th. J. H. Krispijn (eds.), *Veenhof Anniversary Volume. Studies Presented to Klaas R. Veenhof on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Publications de l'Institut historique et archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul 89 (Leiden, 2001), 515–527, p. 516.

[3] The Sumerian sources are quoted in this paper according to the translation in the The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL) in Internet (http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/).

> Anzud bird settled its young. In its trunk, the phantom maid built herself a dwelling, the maid who laughs with a joyful heart. But holy Inana cried!" (lines 40–46).

The holy Inana had transplanted the tree in order to get wood for her luxuriant chair and bed, but she was unable to cut the tree. The hero Gilgamesh came to help and "took his bronze axe used for expeditions, which weighs seven talents and seven minas, in his hand. He killed the snake immune to incantations living at its roots." (lines 138–140). The snake is killed, while the Anzud bird with its young and the phantom maid are chased away into the mountains and to the wilderness correspondingly. Thus far we can recognize in this tale an ancestor of the international type ATU 317, "The golden apple."[4]

In the Shamshum story, which was analysed by Vanstiphout, the eagle-serpent tree episode is told as follows: the hero and his son wandered all over the earth, until they came to the great sea beyond which was an island. On the seashore there was a big tree, and coiled around its trunk was a serpent that fed upon the young of an eagle nesting in the treetop. Shamshum killed the serpent, and when the mother eagle returned, she held Shamshum for the son of Adam, who comes and kills her young each year. The eaglets correct their mother, telling her that Shamshum had saved them by killing the serpent. The grateful eagle promises to grant him whatever he desires. Shamshum only wishes to be taken with his son to the far island. The eagle takes both of them on its wings and carries them there (p. 32).[5]

I am certain that by using the comparative folkloristic material one can demonstrate how the literary motifs that occur in diverse Mesopotamian myths actually belonged together in a living oral tradition. The use of comparative material eventually will show that the myths committed to writing in ancient Mesopotamia were only a few redacted forms from a vast ocean of widely variegated oral narratives.[6] By means of comparative research, we can reconstruct the parts that are missing in the written record and reconstruct the oral traditions. In the story of Shamshum and its parallels, which will be discussed below, one can see how the motif of killing the dragon or serpent and other favours to the eagle's young is the prerequisite for the hero's journey on the grateful eagle's back. These two motifs are used in different myths in ancient Mesopotamia, but as the evidence from modern folk-tales indicates, they can be used to form one coherent narrative.[7] In regard to ancient Mesopotamia, this brings us to the mythological being Anzu(d), who can be either good or evil. According to the Akkadian epic, the evil Anzu steals the Tablet of Destiny from Enlil and subsequently is slayed by Ninurta. Although not explicitly called Anzu, the eagle in the Etana myth initially does evil by eating the snake's young, but it later helps Etana by carrying him to the

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[4] The rest of the Sumerian story and its parallel in the 12th tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, is comparable to the modern folk-tale type ATU 470. We can then describe the Sumerian poem folkloristically as consisting of two parts, namely ATU 317+ 470.

[5] This folktale can be tentatively described by the type numbers ATU 317+300+ 537.

[6] The question of why these and not other variants were committed to writing can be answered by pointing out the importance that certain stories may have had to the social groups involved in the literary production.

[7] The oral narrative plots connecting the two motifs certainly existed in ancient Mesopotamia. In some Mesopotamian iconographical representations, the defeat of the monster Humbaba is sometimes combined with the motif of ascension to heaven in eagle's back. See A. Green, "Myths in Mesopotamian Art," in: I. L. Finkel & M. J. Geller (eds.), Sumerian Gods and their Representations (Groningen 1997), 135–158, esp. 138–139.

sky, to bring the "herb of birth." Both dragon-slaying and flying on an eagle's back are found with the mythical eagle in the ancient Mesopotamian myths, but the myths where these motifs occur are separate. The comparative evidence suggests that a variant tale, which combined the two motifs, existed orally in the ancient Mesopotamia.

The new edition of Drower's folk-tales has "The Story of the Fisherman and the Sultan," where the fisherman Mahmud is given the task to build for the sultan a castle from ivory and lionesses' milk. After a series of encounters, Mahmud finds the tree familiar from the stories discussed above. The hero:

> "... reached a tree, a palm tree so tall that when he gazed upwards to its summit, his turban fell from his head. Yes, it was tall, that tree! A thousand ram, and it rose from the earth to the heaven – it was so tall! In the palm tree he saw an eagle's nest with her brood in it, and close to them was a seven-headed serpent of immense size – as big as Allah! ... he cut off its seven heads with one thrust of his sword.[8] ... When the monster was dead, he divided its body into morsels and threw them up to the eagle's brood in the tree above. The eaglets ate and were satisfied, all of them. The remaining morsels they put aside for their mother, who had gone into the mountains to hunt for food. The eagle was not like other eagles, but was a *simurgh*" (p. 391).

This part of the new story is very close to the Sumerian narrative poem "Lugalbanda and the Thunderbird." The youngest officer in the army of Uruk falls ill on a campaign to conquer the city of Aratta. Assuming he will die soon, his comrades leave him in the Zabu mountains. Lugalbanda overcomes his illness with divine help and finds himself near the place where stands "Enki's mighty Eagle tree." Lugalbanda feeds a sumptuous meal to the eaglet and adorns it, while Anzud and his wife are foraging for their young. They are upset when their sated young does not respond to Anzu's calling, but their gratitude knows no bounds when they find the eaglet regaled and adorned with a feast. Instead of killing the eagle's bitter enemy, the hero in this version of the story merits the bird's gratitude in a different way.

In the story of the fisherman Mahmud, the hero falls asleep beneath the tree after killing the serpent, then the eagle returns and angrily seizes a mountain in its claws to hurl at him, thinking that he is the criminal who had repeatedly killed its youngs. The eaglets fly out to their mother and say: "This son of Adam killed the serpent, and cut it into morsels which we ate, putting a portion aside for you." (p. 392) Here we find the same motif – feeding the eaglets by the hero – that also is in the Lugalbanda story. The eagle is extremely grateful and cries to Mahmud: "Son of Adam! Ask and desire!" Mahmud says he needs milk of lionesses for his palace. The eagle responds, "I would gladly have given you jewels or gold, or precious stones! I cannot give you that! Ask me anything in the world but that!" In variant stories, the reward that the hero asks from the grateful eagle is often condemned by the bird as being too grievous. This is also the case in the Sumerian Lugalbanda poem, where the bird

[8] The narrator added, "Had the boy struck a second blow, the serpent would have revived. ... It was more than a serpent, it was an 'afrit!" A popular view in the Arab world is that ghul could be killed by a single blow, and a second brought it back to life, as written by al-Jahiz, Kitab al-Hayawan I 150 (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 1934, p. 721).

offers three different sets of awards to the hero before Anzud finally consents to bestow him with the supernatural ability to run fast, and he follows Lugalbanda during his journey back to his brothers, who are besieging Aratta. Finnish orientalist Jussi Aro discussed some Kurdish folk-tales with virtually identical content as the Lugalbanda epic. These tales also emphasize the difficult tasks for the hero, who has already killed the snake, eagle's bitter enemy:

> "The bird is thankful and promises to do for the hero anything he wishes. The hero has an arduous task to accomplish and he has to get to a far-away place; the difficulties are so great that even the bird exclaims: 'Would it be that my young had been devoured this time too, it would be more pleasant to me than helping you to get there!' But because of the solemn vow that the bird has given, it carries the hero to his destination and in some versions also gives him a feather that he has to burn at a critical juncture so that the bird can come to help him again."[9]

In the story of Mahmud, the eagle finally says, "Son of Adam, ride on my back!", and when in the air, the bird asks him repeatedly, while gaining in height, "What does the world look like?" Mahmud gives three different answers – the earth is like a table, the sea like a mirror, etc. (p. 392). This descriptive dialogue motif is associated with Etana's flight to heaven already in the Akkadian epic, and it often occurs in its folklore parallels.[10] From the discussion presented above, one can conclude that some Sumerian epic poems and the Akkadian epics of Etana and Anzu combine motifs from the same sources – an interrelated groups of folkloristic narratives.

The second important example of demonstrating the usefulness of Drower's materials concerns the ancient Sumerian and Akkadian literary formula for the Netherworld – "the road whose journey has no return." The classical locus to quote as the description of the Mesopotamian netherworld is the beginning of Ishtar's Descent:

> "To the netherworld, land of n[o return], Ištar, daughter of Sin, [set] her mind. Indeed, the daughter of Sin did set [her] mind to the gloomy house, seat of the ne[therworld], to the house which none leaves who enters, to the road whose journey has no return, to the house whose entrants are bereft of light, where dust is their sustenance and clay their food. They see no light but dwell in darkness, they are clothed like birds in wings for garments, and dust has gathered on the door and bolt" (Lines 1–11).[11]

Witches and demons were closely associated with the netherworld in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. Only inhabitants of the netherworld or deities and demons are depicted as having wings in Mesopotamian literature and art. The tradition still often ascribes bird-like appearance to demons in modern Iraq. Various demons and supernatural beings frequently

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[9] J. Aro, "Anzu and Simurgh," in: B. L. Eichler, J. W. Heimerdinger & Å. Sjöberg (eds.), Kramer Anniversary Volume. Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer. Alter Orient und Altes Testament 25 (Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 25–28, esp. 27.

[10] See the paper mentioned in previous note, p. 27. Aro cites the material from Ritter, Oriens 21–22 (1969) 17 ff. Some further motifs common to contemporary Iraqi folklore and the ancient myth of Etana are found on the pages 80–81, 422, 451 of the book under review.

[11] The translation is from B. Foster, Before the Muses (Ann Arbor: CDL Press, 1993), p. 404.

appear as birds in Iraqi folk-tales, as Drower remarks: "*jānn*, or fairy-folk, don at will the appearance of birds … When one finds them in 'Iraq, one is bound to recall the bird-men of the early cylinder-seals, and the representations of men dressed in bird's plumage which one finds from time to time on Sumerian objects" (p. xiv). In the large repertoire of demonic beings in Iraq, there are several specimens comparable to winged dust-eaters in the Mesopotamian underworld. For example, the demon *dāmi* "is a half-bestial ogress which haunts the outskirts of towns. Like Babylonian and Assyrian demons, its usual food is dirt, refuse, and leavings of all kinds" (p. xvi).[12]

Also, the demonic beings called *deywa* in modern Iraq have preserved some of their netherworld qualities. There is one extremely interesting description of a difficult road in the story "The Blind Sultan" (pp. 58ff.). In this story, the hero searches for his two brothers-in-law, who have been lost during a mission. The hero must choose from two types of roads in order to search for his brothers and save them. The first road is "He Went and Returned," while the second is "Went-and-Returned-Not," *sadd u ma radd* in Iraqi colloquial Arabic. The description of the perilous road is extremely interesting in that it recalls journeys to the netherworld in ancient Mesopotamian texts. Following some Murphy's law, the 66th page of Drower's original book, where the description occurs, is the only page missing from the current edition, probably because of a scanning error. It is thus pertinent to reproduce the missing page here. There is an old man teaching the hero how to travel that road:

> 'If you take the road "Went-and-Returned-Not" which is perilous, you may perish. You are pleasant-spoken and intelligent, I should be sorry if you came to harm.' Replied the youth, 'Nevertheless, I choose the Road "Went-and-Returned-Not".' Then the old man said, 'My son, you are kind-hearted and soft-spoken, and clever too, so I will tell you what you must do. When you go along the road you will be attacked on all sides, and beaten, and hit with stones, but you must not turn round, or you will die. Go straight on, looking neither to left nor right, and at the end of the road you will find a large castle surrounded by a wall, in which are seven gates, each guarded by a deywa. These deywāt are fierce and will eat you, should you try to enter, but I will give you seven hairs from my beard, and you must make nooses with them, to draw from the mouth of each deywa the gum which she is chewing. As soon as the gum is removed she will fall asleep, and will not harm you. When all the seven deywāt are asleep, you can enter the courtyard of the castle, in which you will find lionesses in plenty. They will not harm you, for a lioness does not eat the children of Adam, it is only the male which does this. Kill and skin one beast, and milk another, then place the skin of milk on the back of a cub, and return by the road by which you came, taking care that you look neither to the right nor left when you are beaten and stoned.'
> Then he plucked out seven hairs from his beard and gave them to the young man, who set off on the road 'Went-and-Returned-Not'. It was just as the old man said: and the young man was thumped and dumped, and beaten and shaken, but he took no

[12] On page xvii Drower suggests that demoness *qarīna* is a "direct descendant of the Babylonian *ardat lilî*". I think that her remarks should be taken seriously.

> notice, nor glanced to right nor left, but went on, straight as a mile, *di*, *di*, *di*, *di*, until he came to the great castle. There it was, and round it a high wall, with seven gates. He went to the first ...” etc. (p. 66).

Here we have a “road of no return,” at the end of which is “a large castle surrounded by a wall, in which are seven gates, each guarded by a deywa.” The seven gates of the nether-world, which are found on “the road of no return” is a topos found everywhere in the descriptions of the world of the dead in ancient Mesopotamian literature. The instructions given by the old man in the fairy-tale are similar to the necessary measures Gilgamesh gave to Enkidu in “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 188–193:

> “You should not hurl throw-sticks in the nether world: those struck down by the throw-sticks would surround you. You should not hold a cornel-wood stick in your hand: the spirits would feel insulted by you. You should not put sandals on your feet. You should not shout in the nether world.”

The ancient cosmogonical layer of the “netherworld” probably was not relevant to the world-view of the storyteller, but it still exists as a far-away land reached by the road of no return, and in this way it is still a part of modern Iraqi folklore. In Drower’s book, we find very few hints on the cosmological views of the storytellers. Probably the only one is on page 90, explaining some symbolic action:

> “The circle that you drew was the world, and I cut it across to symbolize the two spheres. The egg with its yolk and white means the waters of the earth, and the sun which gives it life, and the onion, with its seven skins, symbolizes the seven layers of the earth.”[13]

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[13] For “the seven layers of the earth” in the ancient Mesopotamian world view, see A. Annus, “The soul’s ascent and tauroctony: on Babylonian sediment in the syncretic religious doctrines of late antiquity,” in: Th. R. Kämmerer (ed.), *Studien zu Ritual und sozialgeschichte im Alten Orient / Studies on ritual and society in the ancient Near East: Tartuer Symposien, 1998–2004* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 2007), 1–53.