

Food Prohibition and Dietary Regulations in Ancient Mesopotamia*

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[The purpose of this paper is to discuss some aspects of the origin and development of dietary regulations in Mesopotamia. The sources at our disposal bear witness to an intentional use of food and drink in medical and religious context as vehicles of sustenance and symbols used to express affiliation to a closed social group. Regulations were temporary, concerned a specific social group or individual, were effective at a particular time of the year, and sometimes affected the technique of preparation of food. Their reasons were different: among others, purity issues, self-imposed sobriety connected with ethical values, medical concerns.]

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1. *The general picture*

According to the recent anthropological studies, the most immediate discriminating factors that affect the selection of food within human societies can all be traced back to three basic standards: biology, geography, and culture. This is particularly true for the most ancient period of human history, when men engaged with the environment at their disposal to glean a sustenance.

The ancestral, original link between locality and food, typical of the first communities of hunter-gatherers, underwent quite a change when men learned how to domesticate plants and animals. Up to that moment, in fact, men survived thanks to the edibles spontaneously originating from the surrounding areas of the places that they had chosen for living; by taking control of the environment, instead, mankind widened and enhanced the choice between edible and non-edible items.¹ Men could thus, in a way, give birth to their own food: during this phase multiple motivations intervened, guiding human selections toward some specific vegetal or animal species, leaving some others behind.

Ecological and economic factors were particularly determinant in the first steps of such process, when elements like availability, reproducibility, ease in production or conservation of the edibles and

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1. On the concept of “locality of food”, see Sydney W. MINTZ, “Eating Communities: The Mixed Appeals of Sodality”, in T. DÖRING, M. HEIDE, S. MÜHLEISEN (eds.), *Eating Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Food* (Heidelberg, 2003), pp. 19-34.

practicality of creation of by-products were crucial.² However, physical factors such as presence of harmful substances, personal taste or physical disgust must have also intervened, and dietary regulations arose very soon within human communities. There is not, in fact, an innate “being licit” or “being evil” in food: man assigns such attributes to it, on the basis of his own experience or of the teaching received by previous generations.

It has been argued that the organ in control of taste is not the tongue, but the brain: an organ culturally determined, through which it is possible to learn and transmit valuation standards, which are variable in space and time.³ Memory and personal experience have undoubtedly a unique role in human feeding, and culture influences the way men conceive the edible world – as it is witnessed by the possible natural reaction of mouth-watering or disgust which follows the simple mention of a specific dish to different individuals.⁴

Foodstuffs, techniques of preparation and habits soon became part of a wider system of differences in signification; therefore a new sort of communication by way of food became established, and it lasts to this day.⁵ Since every human being is constructed, both biologically and psychologically, by the food he decides to incorporate, eating plays a crucial role in the biological and ideological process of establishing and transmitting a sense of identity.⁶

From a biological perspective, the nutrient selection is governed mainly by the five senses: taste and smell, that are the most immediately involved in eating, but also sight (presentation of dishes), touch (texture) and sound (“crunchiness”).⁷ From a scientific point of view, three factors justify the avoidance of certain foodstuffs: the first, that is the only one present in humans since their birth, is distaste, i.e. the undesirable sensory properties of a given substance. A second deterrent factor is the consciousness of the consequences of eating a specific edible, in case someone has experienced bad effects by consuming it. Finally, cultural reasons intervene, by assigning a conceptual *aura* to each substance: even though this is attributed exclusively on an ideological basis, yet foods avoided on such base are often thought to be bad tasting and harmful, too.⁸ Beyond the first and most immediate physical aspect, thus, cultural heritage

2. See Robert I. CURTIS, *Ancient Food Technology*, Technology and Change in History 5 (Leiden/Boston/Köln, 2001), in particular pp. 3-90 (for the reconstruction of the first phases of the process of creation of the human diet) and pp. 178-255, which focus on the ancient Near East.

3. Massimo MONTANARI, *Il cibo come cultura* (Roma/Bari, 2004), p. 73. Similarly, Toussaint-Samat stated that “taste is thus a matter of physical sensation, but it also involves consciousness, analysis, and is thus an intellectual act”: see Maguelonne TOUSSAINT-SAMAT, *The History of Food* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2009), p. 485.

4. On the relations between memories, culture and brain see Wulf SCHIEFENHÖVEL, “Good Taste and Bad Taste: Preferences and Aversions as Biological Principles”, in H. MACBETH (ed.), *Food Preferences and Taste. Continuity and Change* (2nd ed., New York/Oxford, 2006), pp. 55-64.; for an anthropological study on food and memory see also David E. SUTTON, *Remembrance of Repasts. An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford/New York, 2001).

5. Roland BARTHES, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, in C. COUNIHAN, P. VAN ESTERIK (eds.), *Food and Culture. A Reader. Second Edition*, (2nd ed. New York/London, 2008), pp. 28-35 and esp. p. 30.

6. Claude FISCHLER 1988, “Food, self and identity”, *Social Science Information* 27, pp. 275-292. and esp. 275. Food has been identified in many cases as a strong marker of specific cultural identities, also because of its connections with both the ecological environment and the social and cultural background: Tobias DÖRING, Markus HEIDE, Suzanne MÜHLEISEN (eds.), *Eating Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Food* (Heidelberg, 2003). See also the interesting papers presented in Alois WIERLACHER, Gerhard NEUMANN, Hans J. TEUTEBERG, *Kulturthema Essen. Ansichten und Problemfelder* (Berlin, 1993), in particular the ones by Schipperges, Barlösius, Mattheier and Neumann.

7. For an example of a multidisciplinary study on the complexity of interrelations between body and culture in the choice of food, see Helen MACBETH (ed.), *Food Preferences and Taste. Continuity and Change* (2nd ed., New York/Oxford, 2006).

8. See Paul ROZIN, Jonathan HAIDT, Clark McCAULEY, Sumio IMADA, “Disgust: Preadaptation and the Cultural Evolution of a Food-Based Emotion”, in Helen MACBETH (ed.), *Food Preferences and Taste ...*, pp. 65-82.

intervenes to teach individuals the appropriate ingredients, combinations, occasions, and techniques for each moment of their lives, according to different cuisines elaborated during centuries of history.

The main result of such attempt to organize the edible world is not a sharp distinction between “fit” or “unfit” for human consumption: at least three different levels of gradation can be detected, instead. Above all are the proper edibles, part of the normal diet; then there are foodstuffs that are theoretically edible, but prohibited or allowed only in some special situations; thirdly, the edible substances that are, however, not recognised as food at all.⁹ Even within the first category, there is no food that is considered appropriate for everyone, at all times, in every situation: each occasion requires appropriate recipes, quantities, elaborations and arrangement. For food is a liminal and potentially dangerous substance, since it crosses the borders between the “outside” and the “inside”, and it comes into contact with the body: men learned soon that each nutrient had effects on their physiques, and developed specific regulations in order to protect themselves.

Anthropologists always dealt with dietary rules using different approaches and providing various explanations: I will provide here just a brief overview of the main theories developed in recent years, with their leading figures.¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss regarded food taboos as a sort of feedback effect originating from the semantic categorization that, according to his theoretical system, is used by each human society to organize natural phenomena. Taboos, thus, prohibit the consumption of animals which do not precisely fit into such binary category system.¹¹ Similarly, Leach acknowledged prohibitions and rules as determined by the discriminating grids with which men classify the world they know, particularly through language: taboo is, thus, everything that is a “non-thing” among given and determined names.¹² Also Douglas considered food avoidances as a matter of classification of the world, but in addition she combined to such issue the concept of “dirty”: when coming to the matter of biblical taboos, animals would thus be classified according to degrees of purity, which depend, in their turn, on their behaviour within the three natural spheres of land, air, and water.¹³ Differently, Harris put forward exclusive ecological and economical reasons for justifying food prohibitions: the selection would, then, derive from the cost/benefit relations within a specific economic system, and from the needs connected to their production and maintenance.¹⁴ Finally, Goody and Appadurai read dietary regulations as an effort to express human roles and cultural differentiations: in their view, societies elaborated conventions which regulate contact with food, in order to stress social and class differences.¹⁵

9. Edmund R. LEACH, “Anthropological aspects of language: animal categories and verbal abuse”, in E.H. LENNEBERG (ed.), *New Directions in the Study of Language* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 23-63: see esp. p. 31.

10. For a synthetic but exhaustive overview of all the main recent anthropological theories on food, see Ellen MESSER, “Anthropological Perspectives on Diet”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13 (1984), pp. 205-249, and the above-mentioned Barlösius in Alois WIERLACHER, Gerhard NEUMANN, Hans J. TEUTEBERG, *Kulturthema Essen*, pp. 85-101.

11. See, all by Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris, 1958); *Totemism* (Boston, 1963), esp. p. 89; and *L'Origine des manières de table*, Mythologiques III (Paris, 1968).

12. Edmund R. LEACH, “Anthropological aspects of language ...”.

13. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (London/New York, 1966); and “Deciphering a Meal” in C. COUNIHAN, P. VAN ESTERIK (eds.), *Food and Culture ...*, pp. 36-54.

14. Marvin HARRIS, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (Illinois, 1985); “Foodways: Historical Overview and Theoretical Prolegomenon”, in M. HARRIS, E.B. ROSS, *Food and Evolution. Toward a Theory of Human Food Habits* (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 57-90; and “The Abominable Pig”, in C. COUNIHAN, P. VAN ESTERIK (eds.), *Food and Culture ...*, pp. 54-66.

15. Arjun APPADURAI, “Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia”, *American Ethnologist* 8 (1981), pp. 494-511; Jack GOODY, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class. A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge, 1992).

Ancient Mesopotamia represents an excellent case study for nutritional anthropology, since different textual sources are known, which allow a diachronic overview on the emergence, circulation and observance of food taboos and other dietary laws. My purpose is to show how in Ancient Mesopotamia, differently from what happened in some neighbouring cultures (particularly the Jewish society), there were no explicit and permanent avoidances of specific foodstuffs, to be observed constantly by everyone. On the contrary, only temporary taboos are attested, tied to some very specific occasions.

Regulations due to medical and health reasons are witnessed ever since the earliest written wisdom texts at our disposal, drafted in Sumerian and dated to the third millennium BCE: to them, some more dietary rules connected with religious issues were added in the course of time. All these were, then, carefully registered in documents whose addressees were physicians, priests, kings, and other classes of people who dealt with various aspects of human body and behaviour. We cannot, thus, draw up a clear-cut list of edibles which were prohibited in Ancient Mesopotamia such as the ones contained in the Biblical books: I will not discuss the nature and typology of the foodstuffs avoided, but I will focus, instead, on the reasons and circumstances of the prohibitions – in the attempt to understand why and how they were introduced and established.¹⁶

2. Medical Prohibitions and Dietary Regulations

The existence of proper medical dietary regimens as a constitutive element of the therapies administered by Mesopotamian exorcists and physicians is a disputed issue among Assyriologists,¹⁷ however, from the sources at our disposal it is clear that these specialists knew well the consequences that specific ingredients had on the human body. Ever since the third millennium onward, in fact, wisdom literature and proverbs written in Sumerian and Akkadian provide evidence of the circulation of knowledge gained from empirical observations experienced in daily life.

As for the oldest examples known to us, a few examples can be mentioned:

nîĝ maĥ gu₇-gu₇-e ù nu-um-ši-ku-ku¹⁸
He who eats too much cannot sleep.

lu₂ še-ĝiš-ì gu₇-a-gin₇ [bid]-da-ni an-dúr¹⁹
Like a man who eats sesame oil, his anus farts.

mu.im.ma sum.sar šad-dag-da šu-[ma]
im.ma.an.kú.e a-ku-ul-[ma]
mu.àm šat-t[a]
ša.mu al.gír.gír.e lib-bi iṣ-ša-r[ip-ma]²⁰

16. The two longest passages in the Bible which present dietary laws are contained in the 11th chapter of the Leviticus and in the 14th chapter of the Deuteronomy. For a synthetic overview of Mesopotamian food taboos and regulations, see Markham I. GELLER, “Speiseverbot”, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 12 (2011), pp. 640-642.

17. For an overview on the topic of the consumption of specific foods in connection with particular health conditions, see the observations made by Frederick M. FALES, “Sul ruolo delle sostanze alimentari nei testi medici mesopotamici”, in L. MILANO (ed.), *Mangiare divinamente. Pratiche e simbologie alimentari nell'antico Oriente*, Eothen 20 (Firenze, 2012), pp. 233-254, and esp. pp. 246-249.

18. Bendt ALSTER, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer. The World's Earliest Proverb Collections* (Bethesda, 1997), p. 24, n. 1.103.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

Last year I ate garlic; this year my inside burns.

With the passing of time, and particularly during the first millennium BCE, some well-structured medical compendia were drafted and made available to specialists, and they contained also specific admonitions against a few foodstuffs.²¹ Together with these avoidances, however, we must recognize the concurrent presence of a conscious use of foodstuffs as a *materia medica*, since distinct edibles were administered by physicians to patients who needed to gain back strength or other physical faculties.²² In a later phase of Mesopotamian history, and more specifically in some Late-Babylonian texts, the knowledge that was previously summarized in proverbs had ended up being systematized and recorded at a high level of detail, and it showed the awareness gained by professionals for the use of food in a medical context.²³

ú.ga¹.raš.sar : ú.še.lú.sar ša igi^{II}-šú gíg nu kù
 ú.lu.úb.sar : ú-ru₉-lu sar ša igi^{II}-šú gíg nu kù²⁴

Leek or coriander: he who has sore eyes must not eat it.

Turnip or *urullu*: he who has sore eyes must not eat it.

In this and similar passages, thus, a direct connection is drawn between different types of herbs (or vegetables) and some sickness, i.e. sore eyes in the case of the text just mentioned.²⁵ Similarly, other sources ban garlic, *šamaškillu* (shallot?), cress, *urnû* (a mint plant), and leek for a given amount of days (seven or three), to patients who suffer of cough:

ud.7.kam sum.sar sum.sikil.sar ga.raš.sar *la ikka*²⁶
 For seven days he must not eat garlic, *šamaškillu*, or leek.

sum.sar sum.sikil.sar ú.[ga.raš] saḫ-lé-e ú-ur-ni-e 3 *ūmē la ikka*²⁷
 For three days he must not eat garlic, *šamaškillu*, leek, cress or mint.

20. K.4347+16161, iii 56-59. The text, a collection of bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian proverbs coming from the Aššurbanipal library, has been published by Wilfred G. LAMBERT, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Winona Lake, 1996), pp. 239-250.

21. On nutritional diseases see, beside the observations made in the following pages, also JoAnn SCURLOCK, Burton R. ANDERSEN, *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine. Ancient Sources, Translations, and Modern Medical Analyses* (Urbana/Chicago, 2005), pp. 155-164.

22. For an example regarding the use of pigs in medical context, see Jacques LEVY, Annie ATTIA, Gilles BUISSON, “L’usage médical des cochons”, in B. LION, C. MICHEL (éds.), *De la domestication au tabou: le cas des suidés au Proche-Orient ancien* (Paris, 2006), pp. 195-203.

23. See Nils P. HEEBEL, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, AOAT 43 (Münster, 2000); JoAnn SCURLOCK, Burton R. ANDERSEN, *Diagnoses in Assyrian ...*; Frederick M. FALES, “Sul ruolo delle sostanze alimentari ...” and the bibliography there mentioned.

24. BAM 1, iii 38-39.

25. For an account on the usage of herbs in Mesopotamian medical practice, see Barbara BÖCK, “Sourcing, Organizing, and Administering Medicinal Ingredients”, in K. RADNER, E. ROBSON (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 690-705.

26. BAM 6, 574, ii 30 (= BAM 6, 575, iii 17).

27. BAM 575, ii 36-37.

In medical contexts, dietary regulations could take the shape of explicit prohibitive admonitions, as for the instances just mentioned, but they were also presented in the traditional protasis-apodosis form (typical of omens, wisdom and divinatory texts), showing thus that within the ancient Mesopotamian logic, a clear relation of inference connected the two elements of the antecedent and the consequent.²⁸ Such conditional phraseology had in fact the purpose of providing suggestions for the actions to take in some given circumstances, since each sign described by the protasis (“if...”) necessarily brought to the consequences described in the apodosis (“...then.”): those who knew these texts could, then, take their countermeasures and act to avoid eventual damages or worsening of the initial situation.

This is the case, for example, of another medical text which contained a specific section of eleven lines, unfortunately quite broken but that clearly warned against some given edible items, as they could have negative effects on either the physical or psychological level:

diš sag.du bal.gi.ku₆ kù-ma sag.du-su šī-ib-tú ul tuk
 diš sag.du šir.bur.mušen mi kù-ma i.ba i-nam-[xx]
 diš [ú] šu-mut-tu kù-ma la-sa-ma li-x-[.....]
 diš ga.raš kù-ma ni-til-šu lal-ti
 diš sum.sar sum.sikil.sar kù-ma ana sag.ki gig
 diš ú.ša-šu-um-tú kù-ma i-te²-[x x x]
 diš ú.lu.ub.sar ú.lú.u_x.lu kù-ma [x x x x]
 diš ú ka-mu-na ú i-ḫa-tú kù-ma ana^[x] [x x x]
 diš ú.ḫur.sag ú.ša.bal.sar kù-ma i^[x] [x x x]
 diš ú.nu.luḫ.ḫa kù-ma^[x] iš lib-[x x]
 diš ú.a.zal.lá kù-ma ni-is-sa-tú i-m[a-ši]²⁹
 If he eats the head of a turtle, he will have no gray hair;
 if he eats the head of a black raven, oil [...];
 if he eats *šumuttu*, he [will be able] to run;
 if he eats leeks, his eyesight will diminish;
 if he eats garlic or *šamaškillu*, (it is effective) for an illness of the forehead;
 if he eats *šašumtu*, [...];
 if he eats turnip or *amīlānu*, [...];
 if he eats *kamūnu* (cumin?) or ..., (it is effective) for [...];
 if he eats *azupirānu* or ..., [...];
 if he eats *nuḫurtu*, [...];
 if he eats *azallū*, he will forget (his) worries.

Examples of foodstuffs administered to patients appears in the case of ear diseases, and the prescription of such potions and foodstuffs usually brought to a positive outcome. Interestingly, the instructions contained in these texts concerned not only the edible items in themselves, but also the techniques of preparation: in one case the sick person must eat and drink only warm substances, and in another instance an “untouched” herb must be eaten inside an emmer-bread.³⁰ Sometimes, it was also specified that patients must take their medicines with an empty stomach.³¹

28. The concept behind the protasis/apodosis formula (applied in particular to ominous texts) has been discussed by Francesca ROCHBERG, *In the Path of the Moon. Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy*, Studies in Ancient Magic Divination 6 (Leiden/Boston, 2010), esp. 373-409.

29. BAM 318, iii 19-29.

30. All these cases have been studied and summarized by JoAnn SCURLOCK, Dafydd STEPHENS, “A Ringing Endorsement for Assyro-Babylonian Medicine: The Diagnosis and Treatment of Tinnitus in 1st Millennium BCE Mesopotamia”,

All the prescriptions contained in medical compendia and similar texts could be applied, as far as we can understand, to every man or woman – or, better, to all those who could afford a medical consultation.³² But Mesopotamia has also handed down the evidence of a few special cases treated by the highly qualified professionals who had the task of curing special patients, with a focus in particular on the Neo-Assyrian king.

Letters dating to the eighth and seventh centuries provide interesting details on the exchange of information between the ruler, concerned about the regimen to observe in order to keep his health, and various scholars who answered by gathering the data from their own cultural baggage, or else from the contents of hemerologies and menologies, or through the observation of natural phenomena of various kinds.³³ Such information was directed also to the cooks and other personnel working inside the Palace kitchens, whose task was to adjust the daily menu of the royal entourage according to the instructions received. The danger that jeopardized the king's well-being had a double nature: it could be purely physical, that is related specifically to the toxicity of a foodstuff, or else moral, in case he caused the anger of a god by ingesting a food which was considered taboo for any reason.

This epistolary documentation increased in particular during the reign of Esarhaddon, a king who seems to have suffered of poor health for most of his life.³⁴ Significantly, among the letters sent by Assyrian and Babylonian scholars concerning various astrological, magical, medical and religious matters, the vast majority (201 of 248 datable texts, out of a total of 389 letters) date to Esarhaddon's reign, and in particular 170 to the last two years of his life (671-669 BCE).³⁵ These data can be explained in the light of a progressive worsening of the ruler's health conditions and possibly also to his apprehensive personality that brought him to some exaggerations in self-regulating behaviours:

*a-ta-a šá-ni-ú ina ud-mi an-ni-e giš.banšur ina pa-an
lugal be-lí-ia la e-rab (...)
[a-ka-lu šá ku]-sa-pi [šá-tu-u šá] □ka□-ra-ni
[ba-si-mur]-šu [ta igi lugal i]-na-šar
□mi□-[ku dam]-□qu□ iḫ-ḫa-sa-sa
ka-[ru-u] □ik□-ki la a-[ka]-lu la šá-tu-u
ṭè-e-mu ú-šá-šá mur-šu ú-rad³⁶*

Audiological Medicine 6 (2008), pp. 4-15. A similar case concerning a renal sickness can be found in Markham I. GELLER, *Renal and Rectal Disease Texts*, BAM 7 (Berlin, 2005), pp. 32-33, i 19'-21'.

31. See for example Barbara BÖCK, "Sourcing, Organizing, and Administering ...", p. 691.

32. See JoAnn SCURLOCK, Burton R. ANDERSEN, *Diagnoses in Assyrian ...*, pp. 8-10 and fn.33.

33. Most of these documents are collected in the eighth volume of the series *State Archives of Assyria*: Hermann HUNGER, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, SAA 8 (Helsinki, 1992). Some more other references are scattered through all the *corpus* of the Neo-Assyrian letters.

34. See Frederick M. FALES, "Esarhaddon e il potere della divinazione", in F.M. FALES, C. GROTTANELLI (edd.), *Soprannaturale e potere nel mondo antico e nelle società tradizionali* (Milano, 1985), pp. 95-118.

35. The texts have been collected and published in the tenth volume of the series *State Archives of Assyria*: see in particular Simo PARPOLA, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, SAA 10 (Helsinki, 1993), p. xxix, Table II.

36. SAA 10, 196, 14-16 and r. 10-18. The chief exorcist made the same exhortation also in another occasion, when the king was suffering for a fever that made him weak and left him prostrate in bed: *mu-ru-us-su ú-ša de-'i-iq a-dan-niš ket-tu li-ik-te-ru mi-i-nu ša ṭa-bu-u-ni le-ku-lu*, "His illness will depart — he will be just fine. True, they should wait and eat what is appropriate" (SAA 10, 142, r. 6-10).

This typology of records shows, however, a significant increment in number and geographical diffusion during the first millennium BCE; the exemplars known today are, in fact, mostly dated to the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.

With hundreds of contingencies included in the tablets that composed them, hemerologies and menologies provided regulations for every aspect of human life, social relations, working activities, and religious customs. In my opinion, it would be unlikely that Mesopotamian men could remember all these recommendations by heart, and observe all of them during every day of their lives. It is more plausible, instead, that whoever was in need of a particular physical or moral state of purity referred to those texts, so that he (or she) could rightfully approach the gods and legitimate his (or her) request in front of them.

Professor Alasdair Livingstone has recently provided a new, complete edition of all the hemerological texts known and available today, which show how multifaceted and comprehensive these were, and has greatly broadened our knowledge on such fundamental sources.³⁹

He has proposed a new system of classification, assigning them to six classes as indicated in the chart:⁴⁰

GENRE	PUBLISHED EXAMPLE	NUMBER OF EXEMPLARS
The Babylonian Almanac	VR 48-9	63
The Offering Bread Hemerology (Aššur Hemerology)	KAR 178	11
The Prostration Hemerology (Nineveh Hemerology)	STT 301	7
The Hemerology for Nazimaruttaš	KAR 147	5
The Hemerology for the First 7 Days of Tašrītu	Sumer 9, 25	1
Fruit, Lord of the Month	unpublished	7

All these sources are usually very clear and systematic: for each one of the thirty days of the twelve months of the ideal Mesopotamian year one entry is reported, which might be either simply *še*, favourable, or *nu.še*, unfavourable. Only in a few rare occasions a day could be considered *u₄.sa₉.kám še* (*mišil ūmi magir*), indicating thus that only half of it was propitious.⁴¹ Usually, we encounter also some more specific entries which might take the concrete shape of an admonition, such as *ana 30 lišken*, ‘he

39. Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, *Hemerologies and Menologies of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, CUSAS 25 (Bethesda, 2013). The book has been published a few months after I presented this paper in Wrocław.

40. This chart has been presented by Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, “The Babylonian Almanac: A Text for Specialists?”, in B. Groneberg, H. Spieckermann (eds.), *Die Welt der Götterbilder*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 376 (Berlin/New York, 2007), pp. 85-101, see esp. 86.

41. The nature of these texts is witnessed also by the Babylonian word which denote them: *uttukku*. This, in fact, is a Sumerian loanword from *ud* “day” and *tùg* “propitious”.

should prostrate himself to Sin' or else of a prohibition, for example *sum.sikil.sar nu kú*, 'he should not eat onion'. Sometimes, these positive or negative exhortations are followed by an apodosis that explains the consequences of a possible transgression, like 'he should enter a tavern, he will be filled with life', or 'he should not eat dates, his teeth will fall out'. Food appears often in these texts, under the shape of offerings and libations to be presented in front of various gods and as object of prohibition or, on the contrary, of prescription.

We can ask ourselves who were the main addressees of such admonitions, and if every man was subject to them – and, what is of our particular interest, if everyone followed their food regulations. For certain, the social class that was constantly involved with purity rules was the one of priests and all those individuals who frequented daily the templar buildings. They must in fact avoid all those ingredients that could have caused inconveniences to gods, and therefore they abstained from garlic, onions, cress, leeks, and everything that could have caused them halitosis, or any other negative effect.⁴²

Not one hemerological text informs us explicitly on the audience it addressed, but it must have been larger than the exclusive priestly or templar social class. A few hints internal to the sources might provide us some clues: in this respect, two interesting cases seem to be the second and the third types of the chart presented above. One is the Offering Bread Hemerology, which for the second day of the seventh month affirms:

ud.2.kám ku₆ nu kú zi.ga tuk¹
 kimin šuk-su ana ^dbe dingir-šú gar-ma ma-ḥir⁴³
 (In the month Tašrītu) On the 2nd day: He should not eat fish, otherwise he will have loss.⁴⁴
 Ditto. He should set his offering bread for Marduk and for his personal god. It will be accepted.

The main purpose of this text is to specify the propitious dates in which the deities would have accepted offerings of bread with benevolence; however, just as all the other exemplars, it included also a wider range of events, thus showing the typical interest in the more general concept of *fas et nefas*.

The Prostration Hemerology focuses, instead, on certain dates and times of day on which a man, who is simply referred to by the third person singular, should prostrate himself to named gods. Some examples are:

On the 10th day of the month of Elul he should prostrate himself before Sin.
 He should drink milk and rub himself with fine oil.
 On the 16th, at daybreak, he should prostrate himself before Adad, dedicate a gift;
 in an inundation Adad will spare his possessions.⁴⁵

42. This diffidence continued in later generations, as it is attested for example in the Babylonian Talmud, according to which onions and garlic must be avoided before the fourth hour (i.e. noon, see bBer 44b), and the Kethuboth text states that priests were disqualified from performing their duty in the Temple if they had an offensive breath (bKet 75a). Similar admonitions can be found in the so-called South-Arabian "self-confessions" (for which see Jacques RYCKMANS, "Les confessions publiques sabéennes: le code sud-arabe de pureté rituelle", AION 32 (1972), pp. 1-15) and in a Muslim Hadith by Mohammed, the fourth of the Book of Prayers: "The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) forbade eating of onions and leek. When we were overpowered by a desire (to eat) we ate them. Upon this he (the Holy Prophet) said: He who eats of this offensive plant must not approach our mosque, for the angels are harmed by the same things as men" (1145). See also 1147, according to which onion, garlic and leek are forbidden "for the angels are harmed by the same things as the children of Adam".

43. KAR 178, obv. iv 20-21.

44. It is interesting to note that in the Hemerology for the First 7 Days of Tašrītu, where food regulations appear very often, in the second day garlic, leek, cress, roasted meat, beef, goat and pork are prohibited, but there is no mention of fish.

On the basis of their contents, we can deduce the following: the Offering Bread Hemerology would be intended for members of the wealthy social class, who were able to afford all the offerings mentioned in the text.⁴⁶ The audience of the Prostration Hemerology, instead, was apparently more involved with the keeping of animals, and was not necessarily composed by well-to-do men, since the cultic actions mentioned in this text do not involve any particular expenditure. We can deduce, thus, that different types of hemerological texts existed, which could interest ideally every member of the Mesopotamian society: the fact that dietary regulations were included in almost the totality of the documents attests their wide distribution and their knowledge and acceptance by the majority of the population.

As for the Neo-Assyrian kings, many textual and iconographic sources witness that they enjoyed at their dining tables foods coming from every land under their control, savouring an extremely variegated menu. However, because of their role as political and religious leaders, they had the duty of observing some specific behavioural rules, including the ones that defined what, when, and how they were allowed to eat, and which ingredients were prohibited to them, particularly in some given days of the year. Such avoidances were based on medical or cultic criteria, and were usually linked to the religious calendar:⁴⁷ the rulers' diet determined also the menu of the inner cycle of their entourages, and we can imagine that the court and the royal family arranged their meals according to their kings' requirements.

Prohibitions were mostly dictated by each individual situation, and connected to the ritualized actions that the ruler was called to perform: for example, on the occasion of *namburbî* rituals he was to abstain from fish, garlic and leek for three days.⁴⁸ Given these premises, it appears clear why in a text dating to the eighth century, the Babylonian king Nabû-šumu-iškun was epitomized as an impious ruler for having made the temple personnel of the Ezida eat leek.⁴⁹

ga.raš.sar *ik-kib é-zi-da* ʾšáʾ kin² d⁴ag
ú-[qa]r-rib u <lú>.ku₄.é.meš ʾul²-ta-kil

He introduced the leek, which is taboo to the Ezida ... the god Nabû,
and made those privileged to enter the temple eat (it).

45. This example has been provided (in translation, as presented here) by Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, "The Babylonian Almanac ...", p. 90.

46. Other passages also confirm the high status of the addressees of this hemerology, who must have had business at the Palace, and needed therefore to know the auspicious days in which the king would have been benevolent, that appear quite often in the source. See Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, "The Babylonian Almanac ...".

47. For the religious influences on diet, see William W. HALLO, "Biblical Abominations and Sumerian Taboos", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1985), pp. 21-40.; Markham I. GELLER, "Taboo in Mesopotamia. A Review Article", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 42 (1990), pp. 105-117; Karel VAN DER TOORN, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 22 (Assen/Maastricht, 1985), especially 33-36. See also the other bibliography mentioned here below.

48. See the examples provided by Stefan M. MAUL, *Zukunftsbewältigung. Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonischassyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi)*, *Baghdader Forschungen* 18 (Mainz am Rhein, 1994).

49. See Egbert VON WEIHER, "Marduk-apla-ušur und Nabû-šumu-iškun in einem spätbabylonischen Fragment aus Uruk", *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 15 (1984), pp. 197-224; a new edition is available today by Grant FRAME, *Rulers of Babylonia from the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 B.C.)*, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods 2* (Toronto/Buffalo/London, 1995): RIM.B.6.14.1. On this text, with a particular relation to the wider topic of ritual purity, see also Karel VAN DER TOORN, "La pureté rituelle au Proche-Orient Ancien", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 206 (1989), pp. 339-356, particularly pp. 351-353.

I have mentioned above the medical dietary prescriptions provided through letters and reports and sent by scholars from different cities of the Assyrian empire; however, temporary food taboos due to specific sacred days or religious performances are attested too. The kind of information that could reach the king was usually reported as the following example shows:

ina ugu qí-ba-a-ni ša lugal iš-pur-a-ni
qí-ba-a-ni lugal li-šur ša i-šá-tú
la-pit-u-ni lugal la e-kal
ku-zi-pi ša ta-ri-ti
 lugal ina ugu-šú i-na-áš-šī⁵⁰

Concerning the injunctions about which the king wrote to me,
 the king should observe the injunctions carefully:
 “The king does not eat anything cooked,
 the king wears the clothes of a nurse.”

Reference texts that had been consulted were, therefore, quoted word for word: many reports sent to the king included passages from these original sources, and among the almost four hundreds letters mentioned before, thirty-eight contain hemerological citations – attesting, thus, their practical use as concrete guides concerning not only common people, but even the most important political matters.⁵¹ Dietary regulations did not exclusively appear as negative imperatives, but (similarly to what happened in the medical texts mentioned before) we find also exhortations to eat emmer bread, beef, mutton, and fowl, and to drink emmer beer.⁵²

One hemerology, the text known from its *incipit* as *inbu bēl arḫi*, “Fruit, lord of the month”, was in all likelihood written for one Assyrian king in particular, perhaps Esarhaddon himself. Among many “usual” food regulations, that appeared with remarkably high frequency (almost daily, especially in determinate months of the year), one was peculiar and proposed a direct combination between food and clothes, probably because they were the most direct and external symbols of physical purity.⁵³

50. SAA 10, 275, 14-r.5.

51. Further evidence comes from the archaeological excavations, since almost all the major Neo-Assyrian libraries that have been dug contained these texts: Kalhu, Sultantepe, Aššurbanipal’s library in Nineveh, Aššur. See Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, “The Babylonian Almanac ...”. On this kind of texts and their implication on the everyday-life of Mesopotamian men, see also the various articles by the same scholar: Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, “The Case of the Hemerologies: Official Cult, Learned Formulation and Popular Practice”, in E. MATSUSHIMA (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East. Papers of the First Colloquium on the Ancient Near East – The City and Its Life Held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo) March 20-22, 1992* (Heidelberg, 1993), pp. 97-113; “How the Common Man Influences the Gods of Sumer”, in I.L. FINKEL, M.J. GELLER (eds.), *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations*, Cuneiform Monographs 7 (Groningen, 1997), pp. 215-220; “The Use of Magic in the Assyrian and Babylonian Hemerologies and Menologies”, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 15 (1998), pp. 59-67.

52. See for example SAA 8, 38, r.1-2: *ninda zíz.àm uzu gud kú kaš zíz.àm ʿnagʿ dingir lugal idim u nun e-ma dug₄.ga-u ka-liš ma-gir*, “He eats emmer bread and beef, he drinks emmer beer: when he speaks to god, king, mighty or noble, it is favourable for him”; SAA 8, 231, r.3-6: *ninda zíz.àm kú kaš zíz.àm nag uzu gud udu mušen kú sum.sar ga.raš.sar ku₆ nu kú ar-ka šà dūg.ga li-ir-ku-us*, “He may eat emmer bread, he may drink emmer beer; he may eat beef, mutton and fowl; he may not eat garlic, leek or fish; afterwards, he should ... happiness”.

53. The hemerology *inbu bēl arḫi* was still unpublished when I presented this paper: I am very grateful to Prof. Livingstone for having discussed with me this fundamental written source, and for having allowed me to quote part of his transliteration and translation of the text, which is now edited in Alasdair LIVINGSTONE, *Hemerologies and Menologies ...*

[ud.14.kám] šá^dnin.líl^du+gur ud še ud.ḫul.gál sipa

un.meš [gal].meš uzu šá ina pe-[en-ti]

[ba-á]š-lu ninda tùm-ri ul kú túg pag-ri-šú ul

kúr-ár eb-bu-ti ul mu₄.[mu₄]

The 14th day is the day of Ninlil and Nergal. A favourable day, an evil day.

The shepherd of mankind will eat no meat that has been grilled on charcoal, or bread that has been baked on the coals.

He does not change his clothes; he does not put on clean ones.

The interdiction for the fourteenth day of the intercalary Nisan, which appears also for many other days during the year, was not directed against a specific food but focused on the cooking technique instead, and in particular against the grilling or barbecuing of meat and bread. For this reason, it was essential that such information quickly found its way to the royal kitchens, where cooks and other professionals could arrange recipes that did not include the use of coals.

4. Conclusion

It is clear, from this overview, how we cannot provide a precise list of foodstuffs considered taboo in Ancient Mesopotamia. In our sources we find, to mention only a few of the prohibited edible items, garlic, onion, leek, pork, turtle, pigeon, beef, fish, dates, milk and many spices. In a few cases, interdictions went against cooking techniques, such as dried or grilled meat – to the extreme of the seventh day of the seventh month, Tašritu, when a complete fast was prescribed.⁵⁴

The common denominator of all these avoidances is their nature as temporary regulations, linked to very specific events which, in their turn, were motivated by religious or health reasons. Moreover, a shared general approach to these issues is quite evident: we do not find personal prescriptions, designed for a single person on the basis of his or her physical and psychological status. Both medical and hemerological texts present, instead, more general possibilities which were then applied to each single case by professionals, who gleaned information from textbooks in combination with their cultural baggage and personal experience.

In other (fewer) cases, regulations concerning food were directed to administering instead of prohibiting specific edibles, suggesting thus a quite widespread knowledge of the biological consequences of food on the human body, and a remarkably aware use of it, in order to heal and improve the health of individuals.

It appears, therefore, that dietary regulations, food prohibitions and taboos in ancient Mesopotamia were a changeable phenomenon, that adapted itself on the basis of each different circumstance and that influenced men's life in some well-defined contingencies, strictly regulated by long-lasting customs and always aiming at ensuring the well-being of individuals and of their social environment.

54. See Peter HULIN, "A Hemerological Text from Nimrud", *Iraq* 21 (1959), pp. 42-53. The text has been recently republished by Maria C. CASABURI, "The Alleged Mesopotamian 'Lent': the Hemerology for Tešritu", *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 17 (2000), pp. 13-29.