

A few remarks on Wisdom elements in Ugaritic epic literature and the Mesopotamian traditional lore¹

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[This note explores the use and adaptation of the “Vanity Theme”, a literary motif typical of Wisdom literature, as it appears within two Ugaritic epic compositions and connects it to earlier Sumero-Akkadian traditions. While the diffusion of Wisdom themes in the Ancient Near East has been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to similar motifs within the alphabetic literature of Ugarit. Focusing on the works attributed to the scribe Ilimilku, particularly in the epics of Keret and Aqhat, this brief study identifies specific Vanity Theme elements that echo expressions found in neighboring Sumero-Akkadian sources. Through an analysis of these passages, this paper examines the interconnections between Ugaritic and Mesopotamian Wisdom literature, highlighting Ugarit as a cultural crossroads where local scholars engaged with multiple linguistic and literary traditions. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how the Vanity Theme functions as a bridge, facilitating the transference and transformation of motifs from Mesopotamian texts into Ugaritic literature during the Late Bronze Age.]

Keywords: Vanity Theme, Ugaritic literature, Ilimilku, Sumerian literature, Wisdom, Enlil and Namzitarra.

1. Introduction

The so-called Vanity Theme is a literary motif belonging to Wisdom literature that appears in many ancient traditions. The diffusion of Wisdom themes in the Ancient Near East—particularly within the Bible³ and Sumero-Akkadian⁴ compositions—has been widely acknowledged. However, less attention has been directed toward similar motifs within the Ugaritic corpus, specifically those found in texts written in alphabetic script.⁵ Certain elements contained in the work of the scribe Ilimilku are clearly indebted to the Vanity Theme motifs.

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3. Clements 1995; Crenshaw 1985; Day 1995; Day, Gordon and Williamson 1995; Goldsworthy 2002; Hubbard 1966; Jenks 1985; Kynes 2021; Murphy 1992; 2002; Samet 2016; Scobie 1984; Wright 1952.

4. See among others Alster 2005; Beaulieu 2007; Cohen 2013; Cohen 2017; Cohen 2018; Cohen and Wasserman 2021; Denning-Bolle 1992; Lambert 1960; 1995; Metcalf 2013; Viano 2023.

5. With the notable exceptions of Day 1980; Giano 1998; Greenstein 2001; Greenstein 2012; Samet 2010.

It is the aim of this note to present such elements and to discuss some patterns and peculiarities that can be considered a bridging point between the Sumero-Akkadian tradition and the later development of the same motif in other corpora. In particular, the author will focus on a few passages contained in the epics of Keret and Aqhat that present an interesting development of similar expressions used in the neighbouring eastern tradition. Through this analysis, the study seeks to shed light on how the motif was contextualized within these distinct literary and cultural frameworks.

The Sumerian and Akkadian corpora found at Ugarit are part of the school milieu that reached the western regions, as Syria, Anatolia and the Levant. Several sites have yielded cuneiform tablets containing literary compositions, incantations and lexical texts written in the two main languages of cuneiform culture.

Ugarit stands out as one of these western centers, and it is also distinguished by the development of a unique local writing system alongside more widely used scripts. This alphabetic writing served as a medium for the local language, utilized both in practical documents and literary compositions. Nevertheless, it is likely that several learned scribes in Ugarit were proficient in both writing systems, with varying degrees of fluency, allowing them to read and write in the several languages of the area.

Among the compositions found in Sumerian and Akkadian scattered in the several archives of the city of Ugarit, we can notice that elements of Wisdom literature do appear now and then in the corpora. Especially seems that the so-called Vanity Theme is preferred in some compositions. Indeed, *Ballad of Early Rulers*, *Enlil and Namzitarra* and *Proverbs from Ugarit* in Sumerian and *Šima-milka* in Akkadian are among the works that better than other display such elements.

At the core of these works lies a critical re-evaluation of human existence, emphasizing the limitations of human possibilities in contrast to divine wisdom and immortality, and, ultimately, the inscrutability of divine will.⁶

In particular, the motif is not an invention of the Middle Babylonian period but is already established in the Old Babylonian sources. It is to the beginning of the second millennium that are dated compositions like *Nothing is of Value*, an early version of *Proverbs from Ugarit*, *Enlil and Namzitarra*, *Ballad of Early Rulers* and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. Therefore, its Middle Babylonian and generally Late Bronze Age development fits into a broad framework that benefits from numerous cues and influences.

The city of Ugarit, benefiting from its position, becomes a crossroad of cultural, social and traditional stimuli. Thanks to local and foreign scholars and erudites, Ugaritic literature thrived, leaving several traces of the fruitful contacts with the other traditions and schools.

2. Wisdom elements in comparison

The presence at the site of literary works from diverse traditions, alongside a rich local heritage of religious, mythical, and epic texts, provides valuable opportunities for comparative

6. For differing interpretations of the Vanity Theme, specifically, those who view it as a denunciation of the loss of established values versus those who argue that it does not reject past institutions and values but rather reflects a different understanding of humanity's possibilities in relation to the gods, see Viano 2023.

analysis. This is especially relevant to Wisdom literature and, more specifically, the Vanity Theme, which is the focus of this study. The passage of interest appears within an epic narrative in alphabetic Ugaritic from the corpus associated with the scribe Ilimilku. This episode recounts the offer made by the god El to the suffering Kirta, as he laments the loss of his wives. The god hearing Kirta's cry, present him with the possibility to ensure him power and richness.⁷ However, the reply of the protagonist discloses the wisdom character of Kirta's reasoning.

i 51. [... lm]⁸
 i 52. [ank . ksp .wyrq]
 ii 1. ḥrṣ .] yd . mḡmh
 ii 2. [w^cb]d . ṣlm.⁹

i 51. [...] What
 i 52. to me is silver, or even yellow
 ii 1. [gold,] together with its land,
 ii 2. [and sla]ves forever?"

Here the idea behind Kirta's words aims to highlight a well-known sub-topic of wisdom literature, namely the limited value of material properties. On the one hand we have the prospect of richness and power that the divine sphere can bestow upon the pious petitioner, on the other, it conveys an awareness of the inherent limitations and fleeting nature of material belongings.

Such statement is well expressed in several other compositions in the Near Eastern milieu; therefore, it is not surprising that also in Ugarit a similar consideration surfaces. Interesting enough, in Ugarit we can find a close parallel in a work originally in Sumerian, and later provided with an Akkadian translation already during the Middle Babylonian period. The text was edited by Arnaud as *Sagesse* (RS 22.341 + 28.53a) and reconstructed on the base of earlier parallels, together with those provided by the compositions found in Emar. A short passage of the composition, which is also known as *Enlil and Namzitarra*, reads as follows:

17. kù-babbar-zu ^{na4}za-gìn-zu gud-zu udu-zu
 18. me-šè al-tù^m¹⁰
 17. Your silver, your lapis, your ox, your sheep,
 18. where will I take (them)?"

7. Part of the final column is corrupted, and it is impossible to know the complete list of goods and possessions that the god put at Kirta's disposal to choose from.

8. According to KTU³ the passage was restored according to III 33-34 and IV 17-18.

9. KTU 1.14 i 51- ii 1.

10. Since the Sumerian version of this composition is not preserved in the source from Ugarit, it is reconstructed according to its parallel in Emar (see Cohen 2013, 153-158). Of the Ugarit source (RS 22.341 + 28.53a, 6'-7'), only fragmentary lines in Akkadian preserve the passage [...]-ka gu⁴-ka udu-ka / [a-a-i-k]a-a al²-ṣqi²¹ a-na-ku (see Cohen 2010: 90). The numbering of the lines in this case follows Cohen (2013: 154). The Old Babylonian recension from Nippur represents an earlier stage of the composition, shorter and with a few variations concerning especially the closing lines of the composition. For the Old Babylonian versions of the composition see Civil 1974-1977; Alster 2005, 327-35.

It is evident that the items listed in the two compositions are not entirely identical. The only consistent element appears to be the mention of silver, which is referenced by both Kirta and Namzitarra.¹¹ However, several observations can be made regarding these texts.

Firstly, the Sumerian composition is a relatively widespread text that originated in the Old Babylonian period. It underwent reworking in a Middle Babylonian context and was subsequently transmitted by various scribal centers in the West. This suggests that the text enjoyed considerable popularity among the near eastern scribal circles of the time, and among them notably Ugarit appears. The dissemination of such a work—as well as others—also suggests its significance within the literary and educational frameworks of the region, highlighting the interconnectedness of scribal traditions across different cultures.

Secondly, the elements listed in the brief responses of both characters draw from comparable semantic spheres. In the Ugaritic epic, Kirta mentions silver and gold, alongside land and slaves. In the Sumerian narrative, Namzitarra echoes Enlil's offer, listing silver and lapis lazuli, as well as oxen and sheep. Although the specific items referenced by the two characters do not align perfectly, they belong to the same semantic domain and maintain a similar structure and sequence.

Both texts enumerate four items, beginning with two elements regarded as among the most valuable in the ancient Near East—precious metals and stones—symbols of wealth and power. This is followed by two terms that evoke the opposite semantic realm of labor and agro-pastoralism, even when viewed from the perspective of assets desired by those seeking power and riches.

If in fact, the land and the slave recalled in Kirta's reply imply that the two elements might enrich the number of properties and fortunes held by the king, nevertheless they naturally evoke the rural life, and the strife connected to land exploitation. Of the same tenor are the ox and sheep scorned by Namzitarra. Both animals are expression of a social environment that is forged by hard-work—for whom the slave may be a rather fitting analogy—and framed in a rather clear background. The parallel is at least curious and advocates for a possible influence of the Sumerian text on the development of the Ugaritic epic's own written expression of the Wisdom theme.

Furthermore, there is another element to consider. However, before delving into this aspect, it is pertinent to introduce an additional source into the discussion. In the Ugaritic *Aqhat Epos*, a similar treatment of the Vanity Theme reemerges, albeit with a different twist. When the goddess Anat offers the young Aqhat wealth and immortality in two consecutive attempts in exchange for his bow, he refuses, suggesting that she request a new bow directly from Kothar and Khasis. Anat's words reveal some intriguing connections to the themes previously discussed.

vi 17. *i]rš.ksp.watnk*

vi 18. *[hrs wašl]hk. wtn.qštk. ʕm*

vi 19. *[btl ʕ]n[t] qš ʕtk.ybmt.limm*

vi 17. Ask me for silver, I'll give it;

vi 18. [For gold and I'll end]ow you. Give your bow

vi 19. To [Anat the girl], your arrows to the intended of the people.

11. For the identification of the speaker in the Sumerian source see the account on previous literature contained in Viano 2023.

Once again, the theme of the two precious materials emerges, presented in the same order; however, this time, the other two elements referencing rural life are seemingly absent. Nevertheless, the semantic sphere associated with labor is invoked immediately afterward in Aqhat's response, where he enumerates the items required to craft an identical weapon for the goddess.

vi 20. *wy^sn.aqht. ġzr. adr.tqbm*
 vi 21. *blbnn.adr.gdm.brumm*
 vi 22. *adr.qrnt. by^slm.mt[[xx]]nm*
 vi 23. *b^sqbt.tr.adr.qnm! bġl il qnm*
 vi 24. *tn.lktr.wġss*¹²

vi 20. Aqhat the hero answered: "The most magnificent ash trees
 vi 21. of the Lebanon, the strongest sinews of the wild bull,
 vi 22. the strongest horns of the ibex, the <strongest> tendons
 vi 23. of the bull's hocks, the strongest canes of the divine thicket
 vi 24. give to Kothar and Khasis."

From a narrative standpoint, there may be little necessity to specify the individual materials required for crafting the bow. The essential narrative element in Aqhat's response that incites the goddess's wrath is his disrespectful remark regarding women longing for weapons. The preceding part, aside from the reflection on mankind's mortality, can be seen more as a poetic interlude. When repeated, it connects the two consecutive refusals of the hero and sets the stage for Aqhat's eventual comment, which will be the basis of his misfortune. Thus, while the narrative significance of detailing the components of the hero's bow is marginal, it remains noteworthy that the passage includes references to bulls and other animals of the wilderness as sources of raw materials for its construction. This once again creates a contrast between the luxury of the precious metals above and the robust feature of the animals.¹³ Albeit suggestive, this last parallel is less explicit than the one previously discussed. Therefore, apparently, we can only speculate about a potential influence from the aforementioned sources, taking into account the existence of a literary pattern of Mesopotamian origin.

But is it truly so? A few additional facts deserve consideration. Notably, *gd* (KTU 1.17 vi 21) and *mtm* (KTU 1.17 vi 22), meaning 'sinew' and 'tendon,' respectively, derive from the same Semitic root as the Akkadian *gīdu* and *matnu*. These Akkadian terms appear together in reverse order in consecutive lines of the lexical list *Izi* (OB Nippur Izi Tab. II, 325-326), where they serve as glosses for the Sumerian entry *sa*. The acrographic list *Izi* was also found in some school tablets from Ugarit and this should not be neglected.¹⁴ In OB Nippur *Izi*, we also find the Sumerian term

12. KTU 1.17 vi 20-24.

13. It is not the author's intention here to suggest that the parallel is structured as and necessarily dependent on what we saw in the previous example, but it could indicate a descriptive pattern known to both texts and given the antiquity of Sumerian parallels, the possibility that this latter tradition was the point of origin of the transmission is highly probable.

14. See Civil 1971: 126.

si ‘horn’ (OB Nippur Izi, Tab.I, 521a) which is also equated to Akkadian *qarnu* (same root of Ugaritic *qrn*) in a trilingual source of Izi from Hattuša (KBo 01, 42 o iii 4). The two lexemes si and sa feature together also in Syllabary B¹⁵ with the same Akkadian equation si = *qar-nu* and sa = *mat-nu* respectively in Syllabary B Tablet 2, 175 and Syllabary B Tablet 2, 185; the same list contains also am = *ri-i-mu* (Syllabary B Tablet 2, 95) in which the Akkadian term derives from the same root as the Ugaritic *rum* in KTU 1.17 vi 21 in association with *gd*. Finally, one may also note that the expression *qrnt byglm* for whose terms we have parallels in Akkadian *qarnu* and *ayyalum* do also appear together curiously in monolingual Sumerian lexical sources of LU¹⁶ probably as glosses (*qar-nu-um a-a-lum*¹⁷ CUNES 52-10-146 c iii 6’, possibly also CUNES 52-10-146 c iii 4’ *qar-nu-um a-a-x*). Unfortunately, the meaning of this expression in the given context eludes the present author, as it appears to refer to a professional role rather than retaining the literal meaning conveyed by the two constituent terms.

To this framework we may also reintroduce the two terms used in RS 22.341 + 28.53a, 6’, namely *gud* ‘ox’ and *udu* ‘sheep’. These terms belong to the same semantic field as the animals listed in the *Aqhat Epos*, although they represent more domesticated counterparts to the Ugaritic terms *rum* and *ygl*. The Ugaritic lexemes derive respectively from the same root as the Akkadian equivalents *rīmu* ‘bull’ and *ayyalum* ‘stag’ which accordingly represent the wild versions of domesticated cattle and sheep.

The selection of animals in the *Aqhat Epos* may, of course, have been motivated by pragmatical considerations, reflecting the actual technological practices involved in bow craftsmanship. However, as previously suggested, its inclusion in the text does not play a crucial role in the overall economy of the epic narrative and may conceal other underlying reasons. Based on the evidence presented thus far, the list of interconnected occurrences of Sumerian and Akkadian terms connected to the Ugaritic equivalents present in our texts seems to advocate for an influence of the Sumerian lexical tradition on the arrangement and selection of the Ugaritic lexicon in the *Aqhat* text. If this is proven to be the case, it would offer compelling evidence for a connection between the various passages that address Wisdom elements in the two corpora. Nonetheless, the passage in *Aqhat* is still worth attention for further consideration, especially when contemplated alongside the aforementioned lines from the *Epic of Kirta* and *Enlil and Namzitarra*. All of the compositions, to varying degrees,¹⁷ incorporate elements of the Vanity Theme. While these developments might have been approached in diverse ways, the narrative framework used to introduce the motif of human life’s finitude remains consistent across all of them. This framework typically involves a divine offer presented to a human being—something deemed valuable, which is subsequently rejected by the latter. In the first case, El offers Kirta wealth and power, but Kirta’s

15. Note however that in Ugarit there are no tablets containing Syllabary B – which in the Middle Babylonian period is known only from Kassite exercises (Veldhuis 2014: 230) – but only Syllabary A.

16. The list is known in the West on several sources, especially in Emar, but also Ugarit and Hattuša yielded fragments containing the list. Unfortunately, many of these manuscripts remain unpublished for the time being.

17. While the narrative of the Ugaritic source of the Sumerian *Enlil and Namzitarra* is entirely centered on wisdom elements, the other two compositions offer narrower and more limited references to the motif, particularly regarding the Vanity Theme. Nevertheless, additional elements of Wisdom literature are explored in the Ugaritic epic; for further reading, see Greenstein 2001 and 2012.

concern is all for the continuation of his lineage. As for Namzitarra, his thoughtful consideration comes after Enlil has proposed him silver, lapis lazuli, oxen and sheep. The prospect of wealth is not what Namzitarra seeks, as he understands that the value of material possessions is fleeting and ultimately confined within the bounds of death. Similarly, the young Aqhat demonstrates a clear awareness of human limitations when he is offered immortality by Anat.¹⁸ As is evident, all the sources chose to introduce the theme with the same gimmick. An undesired or untimely offer by a god is refused because it does not match with the real expectations or needs of the human referent. The communication between the divine and the human sphere is possible but seems to encounter some difficulties that are motivated by the different nature of the two agents, inspiring a wise reflection on the human side. Given the antiquity of the Sumerian forerunners of *Enlil and Namzitarra* and the presence of the motif in other compositions from the same milieu, the motif framing can arguably be traced back to a Mesopotamian tradition. As a consequence, this seems to have provided an interesting cue for the similar narrative development in the Ugaritic epic poems, especially when seen together with the structural and lexical choice in the formulation of the passages.

3. Concluding remarks

To sum up, although with different intensity, the Ugaritic literary tradition, especially in the works attributed to Ilmilku, exhibits distinctive features characteristic of Wisdom literature. This genre, originating in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period, is also discernible in Ugarit, evidenced by school tablets discovered within the site's archives—parallels that extend to other western centres. The treatment of Wisdom themes in Ugaritic texts closely mirrors Mesopotamian examples, both in lexical choices and textual structuring. Furthermore, the framing devices that introduce Wisdom motifs appear to derive from the Sumerian literary environment, suggesting a significant Sumerian influence on the written fixation of these distinctive brief passages within Ugaritic epic production.

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18. The same pattern was already developed also in the story of Adapa, known at that time in a Sumerian version from Old Babylonian period from Meturan (H 142+140; H 158), and in the Akkadian version by Middle Babylonian manuscripts (N 3662; EA 356), which are also more or less contemporary to the Ugarit sources.

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