

Kušû – Crocodile after all?

The correct translation for the Akkadian word *kušû* has long remained mysterious. The CAD (vol. 8: K: 602) remains noncommittal by merely declaring it an “aquatic animal”; a near certainty in view of its frequent association with the fish determinative KU₆ (Cohen 1973: 205). However, other scholars have long attempted to be more specific. The “crocodile” translation of *kušû* already appears in an early publication of von Soden (1936: 22), but when the word was first studied in detail by Landsberger (1962: 89-94), he switched his own initial belief in “crocodile” to a translation of “shark”. This suggestion was cautiously supported by Lambert (1971: 347), but still failed to gain universal acceptance. A review of the textual evidence by Cohen (1973: 203-210) instead argued that *kušû* meant “turtle”, while also acknowledging a case for it meaning “shark”, “seal”, or “crab”. This last translation, “crab”, was subsequently endorsed by Labat (1994: 231), but the “crocodile” translation also began to tentatively re-emerge (Livingstone 1989: 71, Foster 2005: 835). To date, the last installment of this translation saga came when Cohen (2011: 50-51, 218) changed his opinion on *kušû*, no longer considering it as meaning “turtle”, but rather tentatively supporting “crocodile” or “crab”. The confusion has therefore continued unabated, not at all helped by the evidence not being reassessed in over forty years. This piece aims to set the record straight, pointing out the inherent strength of the recently rehabilitated “crocodile” translation and the inadequacy of the perceived alternatives.

Kušû in literary texts

Kušû is decidedly rare in literary texts; there being only three fully published attestations. These are:

ina šadî šinni kušî ašâtma itanarrar

From the mountain, a *kušû*-tooth had arisen and it trembled continuously.

- *Akkadian Lugal-e: Tablet: 1: 39* (Seminara 2001: 56)

[šē]du lemnu qaqqadu qātā ša amēlī agû apir šēpā erê(?) ina šēpi šumēlišu kušē kabis

The Evil Genie (had) the head and hands of a human, was crowned with a tiara (and had) the feet of an eagle(?). With his left foot he was treading on a *kušû*.

- *Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince: rev. 4* (Livingstone 1989: 71)

kušâ ina la'irāni itetiq

He (Nabu) crossed over the *kušû* in standing water.

- *Converse Tablet: obv. 18* (Lambert 1971: 345)

A fourth attestation, involving another *šinni kušî* (*kušû*-tooth), is found in a fragmentary Late Babylonian hymn to Shamash (Reisner 1896: 15: nr.7, l.1). However an ensuing lacuna precludes further context.

Starting out with this admittedly very small dataset, we can still begin to make some initial inferences about the *kušû*. Apart from living in water, a key feature are its noteworthy teeth, and other beings can tread on it. The latter seems improbable for a shark, while crabs, turtles and seals are not usually renowned for their teeth. Perhaps ancient Mesopotamians thought otherwise, but it seems unnecessary to go this far when there is a perfectly plausible alternative which fits on all counts – crocodile.

Kušû in non-literary texts

Fortunately, we can corroborate this suggestion by looking at texts outside the literary domain. Especially useful here is the lexical series HAR.ra=*hubullu*, which features two entries for *kušû* between turtles and crabs:

220	BAL.GI	<i>raqqu</i>	turtle
220a	“.TUR	<i>usābu</i>	turtle
221	NUNUZ.BAL.GI	<i>pel raqqi</i>	egg of a turtle
222	AMAR.BAL.GI	<i>atam “</i>	hatchling of a turtle
223	KUD.DA	<i>kušû</i>	kušû
224	“.A	<i>“ mē</i>	kušû of the water
225	I.LU	<i>alluttum</i>	crab
226	A.LU	<i>alluttum</i>	crab
227	BURU ₅	<i>eribû</i>	locust

Based on Landsberger 1962: 25-26

While this can be construed as evidence for *kušû* meaning “turtle” or “crab”, both run into problems. Before coming to *kušû*, the lexical list already moves away from turtles *per se* to list their eggs and hatchlings. Returning to turtles at this point would seem somewhat counterintuitive. “Crab” does not have this problem, but seems quite unsuitable in view of the literary evidence discussed earlier. However, “crocodile” looks like a logical choice to fit between the two. It can exist both on water and on land, potentially accounting for its dual listing, and can be seen as having properties of both the reptilian turtle and the aquatic crab.

This interpretation gains further momentum when a lexical list of animals with useful hides is considered. The *kušû* appears again, but this time in completely different company:

37	“(KUŠ).DARA ₃ .MAŠ.DÙ	<i>“(mašak) nayyalu</i>	(hide) of a roe deer
38	“ DARA ₃ .HAL.HAL.LA	<i>“ nayyalu</i>	“ of a roe deer
39	“ MAŠ.DÙ	<i>“ šabītum</i>	“ of a gazelle
40	“ [AMA]R.MAŠ.DÙ	<i>“ uzālu</i>	“ of a gazelle kid
41	“ KUD.DA	<i>“ kušî</i>	“ of a kušû
42	“ KIR ₄	<i>“ būšu</i>	“ of a hyena
43	“ KA ₅	<i>“ šēlebi</i>	“ of a fox
44	“ ANŠE	<i>“ imēri</i>	“ of a donkey
45	KUŠ.ANŠE.KUR.RA	<i>“ sisî</i>	“ of a horse

Based on Landsberger 1959: 124-125

Here, we are firmly in the realm of large quadrupeds with tough skins, and a crocodile would fit this category far better than a crab, turtle, or any of the other options.

Alongside these lists, it may also be noteworthy that *dām kušê* (blood of a *kušû*) appears in a fragmentary pharmacological treatise from the library of Aššurbanipal (Köcher 1955: 64: nr.28, l.2). While this may of course be a code name for an entirely unrelated ingredient, crocodile blood would in fact make good sense from a medical perspective. This is now known to have unique antibacterial properties (Preecharram *et al.* 2008: 3121-3128); although whether this was recognized by ancient Mesopotamians is unclear.

In summary, the *kušû* is an aquatic animal which can be stepped on, with sharp teeth, a useful hide, similarities to both turtles and crabs, and maybe even medicinal blood. The crocodile fits all of these

criteria perfectly, while none of the alternative suggestions even come close. So why has the debate gone on for so long, if everything is this simple?

Crocodiles in Mesopotamia

The key argument against “crocodile” is the absence of live crocodiles in Mesopotamia (van Buren 1939: 96). It was above all this, rather than any truly viable alternative, that prompted Landsberger (1962: 89) to seek an alternative translation for *kušû*, thus igniting the current debate. This argument is simple: if there were no crocodiles, the presence of a native word for them is inexplicable. However, while zoologically sound, such a viewpoint does not take into account archaeological evidence clearly showing that crocodiles were known in Mesopotamia. An Indus Valley-style seal discovered at Tell Asmar clearly shows a pair of crocodiles (Frankfort 1933: 50), while an elite Kassite tomb at Nippur was found to contain a figurine of the Egyptian god Bes standing atop two crocodiles (van Buren 1928: 211). Egyptian-style apotropaic stelae showing the god Horus treading on crocodiles also occur in Late Babylonian contexts at Nippur (Johnson 1975: 146) and Susa (Abdi 2002: 209). Consequently, it is difficult to accept that there was no awareness of crocodiles in Mesopotamia – while they were certainly not an everyday animal, they do seem to have been significant enough to have had a word designated for them.

Egyptian, Akkadian and Sumerian crocodiles: Linguistic and graphic aspects

A further counterargument is that Akkadian already had an unambiguous word for crocodile, *namsuḫu* (CAD vol. 11: N(1):245), derived from the Egyptian *n3 mšḫw* (Lambdin 1953: 284). Naturally this raises the question of why *kušû* should be synonymous, creating two words for an animal not even living in the region. However, *namsuḫu* is exceptionally rare, with only two firm attestations both coming from Middle Assyrian sources. Indeed, the word is even absent from the most comprehensive lexical lists, like *HAR.ra = ḫubullu*, which do contain *kušû*. Consequently, the existence of this very obviously non-native loan-word can probably be explained by divergences in dialect – perhaps *kušû* was simply absent from the Middle Assyrian vocabulary, and *namsuḫu* took its place. It certainly does not occur in other periods or regions of Mesopotamia, whereas the aforementioned material evidence for crocodile awareness is much more wide-ranging in scope – just like the attestations of *kušû*.

Furthermore, even if the words did exist in parallel, their vastly different linguistic origins mean that the existence of one should not preclude the other. Since the archaeological finds betray a strong connection between crocodiles and Egypt, it is unsurprising that on occasion an Egyptian word might have been used. However, this would not stop Akkadian from having its own word for “crocodile” too. Further evidence suggesting that this native word was indeed *kušû* comes from linguistic comparison with other Semitic languages, notably Ge’ez and Tigre. These respectively have *kaysi* and *käyäs* meaning “serpent” or “dragon” (Kogan & Militarev 2000: 120). If *kušû* shares its origin with these, translating it as “crocodile” would be a highly suitable fit.

Finally, interpreting *kušû* as a native Akkadian word might also explain why this word corresponds to two different Sumerian words, KUD.DA and KUŠU₂^{KU6} (CAD vol. 8: K: 602). The inherently problematic idea that these are two separate animals, uncomfortably merged in the Akkadian, can be avoided by taking *kušû* as an Akkadian loan-word into Sumerian, while accepting that KUD.DA could be an indigenous Sumerian word already meaning “crocodile”. Since Sumerians traded with the crocodile-rich Indus Valley, the concept may not have been entirely unknown to them. This interpretation may also solve the discrepancy in determinatives: as an Akkadian import, KÚŠU would have been originally unfamiliar to Sumerians, which may explain the need for greater categorization through a

determinative. However, as an established and familiar word, KUD.DA may not have needed this, with the graphic difference then becoming entrenched.

Concluding comments

While naturally the case cannot be proven, the balance of evidence is firmly in favour of translating *kušû* as “crocodile”. This animal alone comprehensively fits the descriptions provided in both literary and non-literary texts, and the ancient Mesopotamians clearly knew of its existence. From a linguistic perspective, such a translation would fit the idea that *kušû* is a Semitic word, closely matching occurrences in other related languages. It may have coexisted alongside an imported Egyptian word (*namsuḥu*) in Akkadian, and alongside a native Sumerian word (KUD.DA) in Sumerian.

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