

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIF OF THE REED
IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN MYTH OF THE FLOOD
AND THE GREEK MYTH OF KING MIDAS

INTRODUCTION

“Where there are no reeds, it is the worst of all poverty”¹ as the Sumerian proverb goes. The common reed – the most widespread species of reed – was one of the most essential plants exploited in the ancient Mesopotamia, especially in its southern marshes, abundant in reeds. Reeds were commonly used for fodder and fuel, for construction of huts, canals and boats, for manufacture of mats and baskets² and even for divination.³ Both the ancient Near East and Europe used reed for measurement, and in this meaning it has found its way to European languages as ‘canon’ from the Greek word κανών (kanon – ‘measure’, Heb. קנה, *quaneh*) and κάλαμος (*kalamos* – ‘reed’). Reed was also the basic material for making pipes and flutes in the antiquity. Pipes and flutes were primary wind instruments and consisted of a single or double reed.

The reed with all its complexity of meanings and functions passed to numerous myths and literary metaphors. In Mesopotamia someone or something could be ‘like a damp reed’ (eg. “A man who behaves like

¹ Proverbs: collection 28, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/proverbs/t.6.1.28.html> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012], 28.27.

² D.T. Potts, *Mesopotamia Civilization. The Material Foundations*, New York 1997, p. 115.

³ S.N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*, London 1963, p. 271.

a damp reed towards his fellow men does not tell the truth either"⁴); a popular literary trope in Sumerian became a carp in the reeds (e.g. "A fish in the deep is as good as a carp in the reeds"⁵, "The *ectub* carp wave their tails among the small *gizi* reeds"⁶). Some of the sayings about the reed are difficult to explain (e.g. "Conceived by no father, conceived by no mother, the reed came out of the breast of the storm"⁷) and probably they will not be convincingly interpreted until further discoveries in the field are made. There are also some intriguing mythological motifs that are hard to understand when they appear in a single episode, but knowing the context, we could try to analyze them through a comparison to other similar motifs.

In this essay I would like to compare two myths in which the reed appears as a specific motif. The first is the well-known myth of king Midas who suffers from a curious affliction: he has the ears of a donkey. Nobody would know his secret unless the reed betrayed it. The other myth is the Mesopotamian story of the flood. When the god Enki swears not to tell any human being about the gods' plan to destroy the mankind in a deluge, it is only the reed that saves people by mediating between Enki and the Mesopotamian hero, Atrahasis. As we can see, it is the reed that plays a crucial role in both episodes. Even if it were someone's activity that caused the desired (or undesired) effect, it would not appear without the reed's mediation.

At first glance the comparison of the two myths may seem to be inaccurate. Except for the motif of the reed, the remaining elements of the stories are significantly different. Even if the functions of the reed in both myths seem to be similar, they are not the same. The large influence of the Mesopotamian mythology on the Greeks is a commonly known fact,

⁴ Proverbs: collection 12, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/proverbs/t.6.1.12.html> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012], 12.b6.

⁵ Proverbs: collection 2 + 6, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/proverbs/t.6.1.02.html> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012], 2.c3.

⁶ *Enki and the world order*, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr113.htm> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012], v. 165.

⁷ Proverbs: collection 7, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/proverbs/t.6.1.07.html> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012], 7.93.

even though it still needs a more detailed study,⁸ but nothing indicates that we could find any similar influence in the analysed myths. If there were no influence of one myth on the other and the similarity between them could be called into question, this comparison might seem to be unjustified. The last objection that could be raised against my argument is that the myth of Midas has already been thoroughly analyzed, while the motif of the reed in the story of the flood is known from too few sources to interpret it correctly. However, my point is exactly that the motif of the reed in the myth of the flood has not been convincingly interpreted so far. Although the myth of Midas is derived from a different tradition, this tradition is to a large degree based on the same roots. The purpose of the essay is not to study the influence between the two myths, but to try to interpret the reed motif and its significance through the analogy of these two examples.

The sources on which we base our analyses of the Greek and Mesopotamian mythology may present some interpretive issues. What we call the 'Greek mythology' is supplied by the legible and – in many cases – complete opuses of ancient poets and philosophers. Studied and interpreted by the successive generations of scholars, it is without doubt the best known mythology for humanities scholars as well as ordinary readers. On the other hand, by becoming a literary field rather than the sphere of folklore, it lost its original character and meaning. Some motifs or syntactic properties were ignored by the writers who had found them illogical or irrelevant. Moreover, the myth of king Midas and his donkey's ears, which will be analyzed in this essay, is known mostly from the Roman sources that are distant from the Greek origins.

The problems we face when interpreting the sources of the Mesopotamian mythology are quite different from those presented above. We should remember that the Mesopotamian myths are many hundreds of years older than the Greek ones, and that they were written on clay tablets in a cuneiform script. The cuneiform texts have been discovered and

⁸ See e.g. M. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, New York 1997.

deciphered since the 19th century. Unfortunately, in most cases they are fragmentary and severely damaged, difficult to decipher, understand and put together into a coherent whole. The mythological stories are reconstructed by collecting similar tablets and constructing analogies, but in many cases we are left to speculate about different episodes as there are no surviving passages. In some instances only single words or phrases lead us to the conclusion that some motifs could have existed in the Mesopotamian mythology.

THE MOTIF OF THE REED IN THE GREEK MYTH OF KING MIDAS AND HIS DONKEY'S EARS

The Greek myth of king Midas and his donkey's ears is known mainly from the Roman sources. The only source that contains the complete version of the myth is Ovid's work, *Metamorphoses*, dated to the first decade of the 1st century AD. The previous authors, like Aristophanes, the Greek comedian of 5th century BC, only mentioned the tale. His comedy *Plutus* contains only one statement concerning the king: "you will then be Midases, provided you grow ass's ears".⁹ As each motif of the myth could be important to analyze, I will quote a short excerpt of the version from Ovid. After presenting the story of the musical contest between the great god Apollo and Pan (see below in this essay) which was won by Apollo and judged among others by Midas, Ovid writes:

The judgment of the sacred mountain-god satisfied all opinions, and yet Midas's voice alone challenged it and called it unjust. The god of Delos did not allow such indiscriminating ears to keep their human form, but drew them out and covered them with shaggy grey hair, and made them flexible at the base, and gave them powers of movement. Though the rest was human, he was punished in that sole aspect: he wore the ears of a slow-moving ass. He was anxious to conceal them, and tried to detract from the shameful ugliness of his head with a purple turban. But the servant who used to trim his long hair with a blade, found it out, who, since he dare not reveal the disgrace he had seen, but eager to

⁹ Aristophanes, *Plutus*, ed. E. O'Neill Jr., <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0040> [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012], v. 287.

broadcast it to the four winds, and unable to keep it to himself, went off quietly and dug a hole in the soil. In a tiny voice, he whispered to the hollow earth, and buried his spoken evidence under the infill, and stole away having closed up the hidden trench. But a thick bed of quivering reeds began to shoot up there, and as soon as they had grown, at the end of the year, they gave the burrower away: stirred gently, then, by the wind they repeated the buried words, and testified against his master.¹⁰

The most comprehensive analysis of the myth was carried out by an English orientalist William Crooke in his essay *King Midas and His Ass's Ears*.¹¹ The literary output of the scholar, living at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, concerned the Indian religion and folklore. Analyzing Indian folktales Crooke discovered some motifs commonly known from the Greek myth of Midas and compared them with the fables collected by other scholars and travellers which, *inter alia*, existed in the Celtic, Portuguese, Moroccan, Jewish, Turkoman and Persian folklore. His research showed that the tale of a king with his donkey's ears, whose secret is betrayed by a reed, occurs in many variants in the fables of Europe and Asia.

In most cases the variants of the tale consist of very similar elements that could be described by the following pattern:

A) a powerful king suffers from an awkward deformity that is the donkey's (or horse's) ears or horns on his head;

B) trying to conceal his defect the king murders his barbers one after another;

C) one of the barbers wins the king's favour and saves his life on the condition that he swears to keep the secret;

D) the burden of keeping the secret causes the barber to suffer from a mental and physical illness;

E) the barber decides to get rid of the secret without breaking the oath so he shouts the information about king's deformity into the hole in the ground;

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.S. Kline, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm> [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012], bk XI, v. 172-193.

¹¹ W. Crooke, *King Midas and His Ass's Ears*, "Folklore" Vol. 22, No. 2, 1911, p. 183-202.

F) a musician cuts off the plant that has sprouted out of the hole (or close to it) to make an instrument;

G) instead of music, the instrument gives out the shout of the barber and the king's deformity is no longer a secret.

The variants differ especially in paragraphs E-G. What is the most important for the purposes of this essay is the kind of plant that has betrayed the king's secret. In the Celtic versions it is mostly a tree, for example a willow, as in the legend of king Labhraidh Loingseach, whose barber discloses his secret to the tree, which is then made into a harp by a musician.¹² In the Jewish folktale about Alexander the Great (who had the horns, which in the classic effigies symbolized his divinity) a barber shouts the secret out to a stream, on whose shore there grows a reed: a shepherd turns it into a flute.¹³ In the Persian version about king Shapur a barber shouts the secret out to a well and the reed growing at its edge is cut by a shepherd.¹⁴ In the subsequent parts of my essay I am not going to analyse these variants: it is not important at this point why the myths are so similar in Europe and Asia and how they spread (assuming that they are the different versions of one myth, not different myths of quite independent origins). The reason I included them in this essay is to use the analogy with the variants in different traditions in order to interpret the motif of the reed in the myth of Midas more thoroughly.

The myth of king Midas differs from the pattern in paragraphs B, F and G. Ovid did not mention the killing of barbers and in his version of the tale only one servant under oath knew the secret. As *Metamorphoses* is the only source we can use to analyze the full version of the myth, it is possible that this element was present in the Greek folklore, but it was not known to the Roman poet, living at the turn of eras, or it was simply ignored by him. We may also treat the fragment as a literary trope, used

¹² G. Keating, *The History of Ireland (Foras Feasa ar Éirinn)*, University College Cork's CELT - Corpus of Electronic Texts, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100054/text040.html> [online: Dec. 28, 2012], p. 174-175.

¹³ J. Sherman, *Jewish-American Folklore*, Arkansas 1992, p. 72; E. Frankel, *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore*, New Jersey 1993, p. 279-280.

¹⁴ A.H. Layard, *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana, and Babylonia*, Vol. II, New Jersey 2002, p. 264.

for building suspense: still, for William Crooke it is the essential element to understanding the plant motif in the myth.

Crooke interpreted the tale in the light of James Frazer's anthropology, as his essay was published merely two decades after the famous *Golden Bough* (1890). Crooke suggested that the myth should be connected with numerous folktales about the plant that sprouts on a corpse of a killed man as an evidence of the murder. It could be justified with a quote from the Celtic version of the tale: "And when the king heard this story, he repented of having put so many people to death to conceal that deformity of his, and openly exhibited his ears to the household, and never afterwards concealed them".¹⁵ The plant in the myth would be therefore animated by spirits of the killed barbers or it would be the barbers themselves after a transformation.¹⁶ The lack of the element of murdered barbers in the myth of Midas could be in this case substituted by the myth of Syrinx, also described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ Syrinx was escaping from Pan, but:

when the river stopped her flight she begged her sisters of the stream to change her; and how Pan, when he thought he now had Syrinx, found that instead of the nymph's body he only held reeds from the marsh; and, while he sighed there, the wind in the reeds, moving, gave out a clear, plaintive sound. Charmed by this new art and its sweet tones the god said 'This way of communing with you is still left to me' So unequal lengths of reed, joined together with wax, preserved the girl's name.¹⁸

The connection between the myth of Midas and the myth of Syrinx that is unclear at first sight, becomes more transparent by recalling the myth of the musical contest between Apollo and Pan, judged by Midas.¹⁹ Midas was the only person who preferred the sound of Pan's reed pipe to the music of Apollo's lyre and that was the reason he was punished

¹⁵ G. Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁶ W. Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 196 et seq.

¹⁷ Ovid, *op. cit.*, bk I, v. 689-712.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, bk I, v. 703-712.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, bk XI: 146-171; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, trans. M. Grant, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/HyginusFabulae4.html> [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012], v. 191.

with donkey's ears. This is another difference between the myth of Midas and the tales collected by Crooke: the Greek version is the only one that explains the reason for the deformity, as in other cases the king was born with his defect. Pan was not the only Satyr who was related to Midas: Silenus the Satyr gave the king the famous 'Golden Touch' when he wandered into the royal garden and was made drunk by Midas.²⁰ "Midas himself had some of the blood of satyrs in his veins, as was clear from the shape of his ears"²¹ we can read in *The Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus. It seems probable that Midas was primarily the essential character in the Greek satiric drama and was represented with the ears of a satyr, subsequently replaced with donkey's ears.²² It may also explain why the tales about king Midas have usually a humoristic character.

It seems probable that the tales about Syrinx and Midas were based on the same myth. We could therefore match the episode of Pan cutting reeds and making the pipe to the paragraph F of the pattern mentioned above. We could also assume that the music of the pipe is the sound made by (murdered?) Syrinx and the whisper of the reeds in the tale of Midas's donkey's ears could be a distant variant of the episode. But while the hypothesis of the reed as a mediator for the spirits of the killed seems reasonable in the case of the myth of Midas and the variants, it could be challenged when compared to the seemingly independent motif existing in the Mesopotamian mythology.

THE MOTIF OF THE REED IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN MYTH OF THE FLOOD

The motif of the reed as a mediator in the Mesopotamian mythology comes from two basic sources that contain a story of the flood. The first one is the Akkadian epic named after its protagonist *Atrahasis* (the

²⁰ Ovid, *op. cit.*, bk XI, v. 85–145.

²¹ Flavius Philostratus, *The life of Apollonius*, trans. F.C. Conybeare, http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/life/va_00.html [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012], bk VI, v. 27.

²² L. Schmitz, *Midas*, [in:] *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman biography and mythology*, ed. W. Smith, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0104:entry=midas-bio-1> [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012].

titles of the Mesopotamian epics usually come from the first line). The epic survived in several versions. In this essay I will quote the passage from the earliest version that is dated from the Old Babylonian Period (18th century BC). *Atrahasis* was based on an earlier Sumerian story of the flood, but the only surviving excerpts referring to the Sumerian version are dated from the Late Old Babylonian Period, 17th century BC. However, the motif of the reed appears for the first time in the Akkadian version, as it does not occur at all in the Sumerian text. The second source for the motif of the reed is the tablet XI from the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh* that in the quoted version was found in the Royal Library of king Ashurbanipal and is dated to the 7th century BC.

As I mentioned before, the stories are compiled from many tablets. Phrases in square brackets come from the different tablets presenting a similar story but more damaged than the tablets which were used to the reconstruction of the story. Phrases in round brackets are added by the translators for better understanding. An ellipsis marks the fragments that they have been unable to decipher. A question mark in a bracket suggests that the word might have been understood wrongly, as it is difficult to decipher.

Atrahasis presents the story of the flood that great gods decided to send to the mankind. Only one of the gods, wise Enki, was opposed to the plan but he swore an oath that he would not warn any human being about the flood. But Enki got the clever idea and decided to inform his devoted man called Atrahasis (akk. "Supremely Wise") about the gods' plan:

Atrahasis opened his mouth
 And addressed his lord (Enki - K.K.),
 'Teach me the meaning [of the dream]
 [...] ... that I may seek its outcome.'
 [Enki] opened his mouth
 And addressed his slave,
 'You say, "What am I to seek?"
 Observe the message that I will speak to you:
 Wall, listen to me!
 Reed wall, observe all my words!
 Destroy your house, build a boat,
 Spurn property and save life.

The boat which you build
 ...] be equal [(...)]
 [...]
 Roof it over like the Apsu.
 So that the sun shall not see inside it
 Let it be roofed over above and below.
 The tackle should be very strong,
 Let the pitch be tough, and so give (the boat) strength.²³

As Enki did not talk to Atrahasis personally, but through the reed wall, he did not break the oath. The origin of this motif can be found in the Sumerian version of the story about the flood, in which Enki saves the hero called Ziusudra (sum. "Life of Long Days") in the same manner. In this version, however, there is no information that the wall which transferred the god's message was made of reed:

At that time, the king Ziusudra, the anointed [...],
 He made ... [...]
 With humility (and) well chosen words, in reverence [...]
 Every day he stood constantly present at [...].
 It was not a dream, coming out and spea[king...]
 Conjured by heaven and underworld [...]
 In the ki-ur (?), the gods, a wall [...]
 Ziusudra hea[rd], standing by its side,
 He stood at the left of the side-wall [...]
 'Side-wall, I want to talk to you, [hold on] to my word,
 [Pay atten]tion to my instructions:
 On all dwellings (?), over the capitals the storm will [sweep].
 The destruction of the descent of mankind [...],
 The final sentence, the word of the assembly [...]
 The word spoken by An and En[lil and Ninhursag],
 The overthrowing of the kingship [...].²⁴

Another similar motif, but with the reed as a mediator, can be found in tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this text the role of Atrahasis is fulfilled by Utnapishtim (akk. "He Who Found Life"). Utnapishtim is

²³ W.G. Lambert, A.R. Millard, *Atrahasis. The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Winona Lake 1999, p. 89 (Tablet III, v. 11–33).

²⁴ M. Civil, *The Sumerian Flood Story*, [in:] W.G. Lambert, A.R. Millard, *op. cit.*, p. 143 (v. 145–160).

the hero who saves the mankind from the flood and the gods give him immortality. As Gilgamesh wants to be immortal, he asks Utnapishtim about his story. The hero narrates:

The great gods decided to cause the Deluge.
 Their father Anu took the oath,
 their counsellor, the hero Enlil;
 their chamberlain, Ninurta,
 their inspector of waterways, Ennugi.
 With them the Prince Ea²⁵ was under oath likewise,
 (but) repeated their words to a reed fence:
 "Reed fence, reed fence! Brick wall, brick wall!
 Listen, O reed fence! Pay heed, O brick wall!"
 O man of Šuruppak, son of Ubār-Tutu,
 demolish a house, built a boat!
 Abandon riches and seek survival!
 Spurn property and save life!²⁶

The division into the reed fence and the brick wall might suggest the presence of two different versions of the story: the one from *Atrahasis* (with the reed wall as a mediator) and the Sumerian one (with a wall as a mediator without any information about reed). Wilfred Lambert and Alan Millard, the authors of the best known English edition of *Atrahasis* published forty years ago, suggest that the explanation for the presence of the reed motif in the story is very simple. Enki addressed his order to the reed hut, because it was inhabited by Atrahasis and could be destroyed as the reed is the basic material for building a boat.²⁷ The common use of reed in the ancient Near East as the basic material from which boats were built may be confirmed by the Biblical episode in which the baby Moses is placed in a reed basket (papyrus reed) that floated on the Nile.²⁸ In the Hebrew version of the Bible, the word de-

²⁵ Ea was the Akkadian name of Sumerian god Enki. But in many stories (like in the fragment of *Atrahasis* quoted before) Akkadians use its Sumerian name.

²⁶ A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, New York 2003, p. 705 (Tablet XI, v. 14-22).

²⁷ W.G. Lambert, A.R. Millard, *op. cit.*, p. 11 *et seq.*

²⁸ *Exodus* 2:3 [in:] *The Bible* (English Standard Version), <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%201&version=ESV> [on-line: Dec. 29, 2012].

scribing Moses's basket (הַבַּיִת, *tewa*) is also used for Noah's ark. The motif of the boat made of reed which saves the people from the flood occurs also in a heavily damaged tablet dated from the Early Old Babylonian Period (20th century BC):

...] I will explain
 ... a flood] will seize all the peoples together
 ...] . before the flood sets out
 ...] ... all that there are
 ...] built a big boat.
 Let it structure be [...] entirely of reeds.
 ...] let it be a *maqurqurum*-boat with the name, The Life Saver.²⁹

What is intriguing is Atrahasis's dream which appears before the episode with the reed wall. A dream sent to a man by a god is a popular mythological motif, but in the story of the flood it is difficult to understand why it appears together with the one connected with the reed's mediation. We could assume that the dream is only a warning that should be explained more clearly by the god ('Teach me the meaning [of the dream]' – as Atrahasis begs). However, the subsequent passage from the *Atrahasis*, where the motif of the dream appears, makes this assumption questionable:

I did not myself disclose the great gods' secret;
 I let Atrahasis see a dream and so he heard the gods' secret.³⁰

In this excerpt the motif of the reed is missing. Regular repetitions of motifs within different variants of a story are a characteristic feature of myths: if a certain element is missing, we could suppose that it is either the outcome of an intentional effort or that the motif comes from a different tradition. In both cases it means that the episode of the reed is more significant and the importance of reed goes beyond the simple identification of the material used in the construction of Atrahasis's boat. If we assume that Enki did not mention his clever maneuver intentionally, it means that he tried to conceal it. Maybe it was an act of

²⁹ W.G. Lambert, A.R. Millard, *op. cit.*, p. 127 (Tablet CBS 13532).

³⁰ A.R. George, *op. cit.*, p. 705 (Tablet XI, v. 196–197).

magic or maybe this artifice could not be accepted by the great gods? Still, we could also suppose that the mediation of the dream and the reed motif come from different versions of the myth that were compiled afterwards.

As there are no more known examples of the mediation of the reed other than those that appear in the context of the flood, it is possible that the simplest interpretation presented by Lambert and Millard is the only reasonable reading. However, there is also another intriguing passage, not directly connected with the flood, which mentions the reed. It comes from *The Instructions of Shuruppak*, a significant piece of the so-called *Sumerian Wisdom Literature*, which belongs to the oldest pieces of world literature, dated to the half of the 3rd millennium BC³¹. The texts survived in a relatively good condition, but the passage important for this essay is not wholly legible. The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature gives the following translation of the statement:

The reed-beds are, they can hide (?) slander.³²

The preceding line was translated as: "Your own man will not repay (?) it for you."³³ but it is not clear if it is connected with the phrase that follows. Five lines of the text above this passage are not legible at all. Therefore, the meaning of the quote will remain speculative only until further discoveries are made or lexical interpretations performed. If we assume that in this context reed is related to the slander (gossip, deception?), then we obtain a motif that is not known from other traditions or metaphors used in Mesopotamia, but which resembles the Greek myth of Midas. It may seem an over-interpretation, but this line should not be ignored while analyzing the motif of the reed.

³¹ P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, [in:] *Wisdom Literature of Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. R.J. Clifford, Atlanta 2007, p. 4.

³² *The Instructions of Shuruppak*, 93, The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr561.htm> [on-line: Dec. 30, 2012].

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

CONCLUSION

The influence of the Mesopotamian myth of the flood on the Greek myth of Midas is unlikely (as the constitutive elements of the myths are substantially different) but not impossible. This single motif could have passed on from the Near East to Europe but its origin could be as well independent in both traditions. It is also possible that both the Mesopotamian and Greek stories in the form we know nowadays are a compilation of various myths. It seems a plausible conclusion if we consider the different parts which constitute the myth of Midas (Midas as the king and judge, Midas with donkey's ears, Midas and the Golden Touch, Pan, Syrinx, etc.). The Mesopotamian myth of the flood seems to be more coherent (and very similar in its versions over the millennia), but the single examples, like the episode of the Atrahasis's dream, might prove the influence of different traditions. If we assume that the myth of Midas is a compilation of various tales, then Crooke's interpretation (the plant as the spirit of the murdered person) would be plausible, but this does not render alternative interpretations impossible.

It should be remembered that the reed is a plant particularly connected with two elements: the wind (as it is moved by it) and water (as it grows on the shores of rivers and lakes). This connection is reflected in the myths, as these two elements play a significant role. In the myths connected with Midas there always appears a river. It is the river that does not allow Syrinx to escape Pan and it is the water in a river that helps Midas to get rid of the Golden Touch. In the Persian and Jewish versions of the myth there is a stream, and the significance of the flood in Mesopotamian myths is obvious. The wind could be identified with voice, especially if it is whispered by plants (reeds, grass, trees). The secret of Midas's donkey's ears was betrayed by wind whispering in the reeds that sounded like a human voice. The wind whispering beyond the reed walls in the Atrahasis's hut³⁴ betrayed the secret of the gods. All this is significant also in the light of the common use of reed both in Greece

³⁴ As also suggest Lambert and Millard (*Idem, op. cit.*, p. 11 *et seq.*).

and Mesopotamia as the basic material for making wind instruments, like pipes and flutes, and the very fact is reflected in the Greek myth of Syrinx who changed into a reed, and it was its sounds resembling a tune that made Pan create an instrument out of the plant.

The pivotal point in the myths is the mystery that has to be revealed – the secret of king's donkey ears and the gods' plan to destroy the mankind. In both stories people survive owing to a disclosure of the secret. In the Mesopotamian mythology Atrahasis built the boat and saved the mankind. In most variants of the story of Midas the king stopped the act of murdering innocent people as the secret no longer needed to be kept. Both in the Greek and Mesopotamian myth there appears an important element that is often ignored by scholars: the oath. Midas's barber swears that he will not betray the king's secret and Enki is cursed not to inform any human being about the gods' plan. In both cases the reed relieves them of responsibility for breaking the oath, because it is the reed that reveals the secret. In the Mesopotamian mythology it was a conscious move, in Greek unconscious, but not accidental. Thanks to the reed neither the barber nor Enki were condemned by their acts.

It might be possible that in the archaic tradition reed could help to get rid of guilt like water (water is known to be a universal purifier), and perform an analogous function. It is at a river bank that Syrinx is transformed into a reed, purifying herself and defending herself against the rape. Midas gets rid of his Golden Touch by plunging into the river. What is intriguing is the role of water as a purifier in the Mesopotamian myth. The gods that have sent the deluge, forgive Atrahasis and bless him in spite of all their previous anger. It might suggest that the flood had also the purifying function for those who survived. And, what is the most important in this context, it is the reed that was used as the material for building the boat and saved the mankind. To conclude, the functions of the wind (betraying secrets, spreading rumours) as well as water (purifying function) seem to be coupled in the form of the reed.

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ABSTRACT

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIF OF THE REED IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN MYTH OF THE FLOOD AND THE GREEK MYTH OF KING MIDAS

The article presents a comparative analysis of the motif of reed in the Mesopotamian story of the flood and the Greek myth of king Midas. In both mythologems the reed has a very similar function: it transfers a message which cannot be uttered to any human being. In this way the reed uncovers the mystery that allows the hero to save a group of people or even mankind. The analysis is based on the variants of the myth of king Midas presented by William Crooke in his essay *King Midas and His Ass's Ears* and two Mesopotamian epics about the flood, *Atrahasis* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which include *The Sumerian Flood Story*.

Keywords:

reed, Mesopotamia, Greek mythology, myth, the Flood, Midas, Atrahasis, Ziusudra, Utnapishtim

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