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Jerrold S. Cooper: Blind Workmen, Weaving Women and Prostitutes in Third Millennium Babylonia

W. Heimpel (2009) was right to look for blind workers in Ur III administrative accounts, since king Šu-Suen himself reported that, after a successful campaign (RIME 3/2.1.4.3 iv 15-31):

He blinded the working men of the cities he had conquered and put them in service in the gardens of Enlil and Ninlil, and in the gardens of the major gods. He presented the working women of the cities he had conquered as oblates to the textile mills of Enlil and Ninlil, and to the temples of the major gods.

The translation of igi—du₄, lit. “to open the eyes,” as a euphemism for “to blind,” can hardly be doubted, and is supported by OB Lu B iv 48 (MSL 12 183; now DCCLT Lu₆-azlag₄, B-C Seg. 2, 103) igi-du₄-du₄ = ša tna₄-ša₅, “whose eyes are torn out,” and the first millennium lexical equations igi-du₄-du₄ = tân₃ nas₃-gatu “torn out eyes” (CAD s.v. nas₃-gatu, pointed out by G. Rubio) and du₄ = nap₃-u₃-ša₄, IGI = “to gouge/tear out, of the eye” (CAD s.v. nap₃-u₃ A).

That Šu-Suen had his blinded captives put to work in temple gardens accords well with both Heimpel’s evidence for workers designated SIG₇-a primarily working in gardens, and, as Heimpel points out, with the ED Girsu workers, primarily working in gardens, designated igi-nu-du₄. Although this designation unambiguously means “not seeing,” many scholars have been reluctant to accept that these workers were actually blind, as Heimpel notes (though see Selz 1995: 51 n. 230: “Vielleicht... gebledete Kriegsgefangene.”)

Perhaps supporting Heimpel’s suggestion that SIG₇-a means “blind” is the sign SIG₇ itself, IGI-gun₃, that is, the sign for “eye,” IGI, barred or canceled.

Whereas Šu-Suen had his male captives blinded, the female captives were not mutilated, but sent off as is to the textile mills, as we, most famously, Zimrilim’s female captives several centuries later (LAPO 11, 1166-1167). The latter, however, explicitly ordered that the prettiest women be sent to the royal harem for music lessons, where some, at least, were available sexually to the king (see Ziegler 2007: 37, 168-169).

Several years ago, I noted that there were male personnel at Ur III Girsu who were identified not by patronyms, but as sons of prostitutes, alongside others who were listed as sons of female weavers (RlA 11, 16; see now Heimpel 2010). Prostitution and weaving seem to be the only women’s professions used to identify male personnel; in the case of prostitutes, it is understandable that the fathers of their children would not be known, and women weavers, especially captives, may also have been sexually vulnerable (as were the captives of Zimrilim), and hence unable to identify the fathers of their children. It is also possible that some of the Ur III prostitutes, about whom we know next to nothing, were captives as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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