Gilgamesh and Agga: A Heroic Story

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Lines 100-106 of *Gilgamesh and Agga* are usually interpreted as Gilgamesh speaking in retrospect. That is, Gilgamesh is recalling his indebtedness to Agga, and speaks of returning the old favor to him. However, I suggest that this section does not look back upon some past event, but expresses the real situation just after the battle, in which the victor Gilgamesh tells the defeated Agga to become his subject, thus allowing Gilgamesh to portray himself alone as having become the hero with no rival.

Keywords: Gilgamesh, Agga, conflict between Uruk and Kish, šagina, maxim

Lines 100-106 of *Gilgamesh and Agga* narrate Gilgamesh's interview with Agga who was captured on the battlefield and brought before Gilgamesh. This section has usually been interpreted as Gilgamesh speaking in retrospect. According to this interpretation, in his young days, Gilgamesh fled from Uruk to Kish, and begged for mercy from Agga, the king of Kish. However, the episode of Gilgamesh, the refugee, has not been confirmed in any Sumerian texts, and is just speculation by modern scholars. In previous translations of *Gilgamesh and Agga*, I felt Gilgamesh was portrayed as two contradictory characters, one is a man who served Agga in humility in this section, and the other is the fierce hero in the previous section, as seen in the translation of lines 92-95 in ECTSL: “‘That man is indeed my king.’ It was just as he had said: Gilgamesh cast down multitudes, he raised up multitudes, multitudes were smeared with dust.”

Since I was skeptical about many scholars' interpretations, I proposed an alternative interpretation nine years ago in a paper in Japanese (Maeda 2000). While the hypothetical episode of Agga's mercy to young Gilgamesh seems generally accepted (George 2003, 9; Nagel 2005, 237), I hope to open up a renewed discussion by summarizing my arguments from the previous paper.

Translation II. 100-106

100f. ^dbil-ga-mes en kul-ab₄^{ki}-ke₄, ag-ga-a gù mu-na-dé-e

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- Gilgamesh, the lord of Kulab, said to Agga
- 102 ag-ga-a ugula-a-mu ag-ga-a nu-bànda-mu
Oh Agga, (I suggest you take) the post of company commander of my (army).
Oh Agga, (you are not pleased with the post. I suggest you take) the post of battalion commander of my (army).
- 103 ag-ga šagina-érin-na-a-mu
Oh Agga, (you are not pleased with the post. I suggest you take) the post of commander of an army corps (the general) of my army.
- 104 ag-ga mušen-kar-ra še bí-ib-si-si
Oh Agga, (people say) give barley to a wandering bird (like you).
- 105 ag-ga zi ma-an-sum, ag-ga nam-ti ma-an-sum
Oh Agga, vitality was given to me (not to you). Oh Agga, life was given to me (not to you).
- 106 ag-ga lú-kar-ra úr-ra bí-in-túm-mu
Oh Agga, (people say) a refugee (like you who lost your own soldiers and country) needs to find a shelter.

Comments

Lines 100-103

If lines 100-103 of *Gilgamesh and Agga* are narrated as an episode of young Gilgamesh fleeing from Uruk to Kish, and being granted an audience with Agga, the king of Uruk, then Gilgamesh should have greeted him at first with words in liege homage, lugal-mu “my lord/my king,” before he hails “Aga my overseer, Aga my lieutenant, Aga my military commander” (ECTSL). Because the essential words lugal-mu “my lord/my king” do not appear in these lines, I suggest that the story does not look back upon the past event, but expresses the real situation just after the battle, in which the victor Gilgamesh spoke to the captured Agga.

Gilgamesh did not think of punishment for the hostile Agga, but he persuaded Agga to become his subject. Gilgamesh asks Agga to take up the post of company commander (ugula) of his army. Since the company commander is a relatively low rank, Agga, the ex-king, does not accept. Then Gilgamesh asks him to take the post of battalion commander (nu-bànda). But again Agga refuses. Finally, Gilgamesh proposes that he become a commander of the army division

(general: šagina). Agga accepts the post of general, and becomes Gilgamesh's subject.

The ascending ranks of ugula - nu-bànda - šagina were the formal ranks of the military organization in the Ur III period, but not in the Early Dynastic period. As far as I know, the earliest example of šagina appears among the royal epithets of Lugalzagesi in the end of the Early Dynastic Period. In the Akkadian Dynasty Period, the šagina meant the vice commander in chief, one of the highest offices in the royal court. A man who fulfilled the šagina was authorized to command the whole army by his king. However, in the Ur III period, the šagina was not the top rank of the army anymore, and it had been demoted to the commander of the army division. There were many šaginas corresponding to the number of army divisions (Maeda 1994). Since the Ur III military organization is reflected in the story *Gilgamesh and Agga*, it is possible to surmise that *Gilgamesh and Agga* was edited in the Ur III period.

Civil has made comments on phrases and words in *Gilgamesh and Agga* (Civil 2000). I found his paper after my previous paper (Maeda 2000) had been published. Since it was too late to refer to it in my previous paper, I wish to refer to it here. Civil wrote a comment on lines 100ff.: “G(ilgamesh) could do anything of Aka. He could make him his subject, assigning him to any rank he wanted, from lowly ugula (more ‘sergeant’ than ‘lieutenant’) to general of the army, but instead sets him free, purportedly in gratitude for a previous favor, ...” (Civil 2000, 187).

I agree with Civil's interpretation of “assigning of any rank of his army.” Civil's interpretation assumes that Gilgamesh could either assign Agga any rank of his army or set him free (line 112). However I interpret this to mean that Agga was set free as well as assigned a rank of the army. Thus my understanding is that Agga accepted the post of šagina and returned to Kish as the šagina.

The Sumerian verb šu~bar “to set free,” which appears in line 112, usually means “to release from debt, corvée, or slave.” But there are peculiar examples in administrative-economic texts of Ur III Lagash which can be interpreted differently. When a man was released (šu-bar) from a labor-group, he entered (ku₄) in the temple of Nanna,¹ and a released man entered in the (group of) gardener belonging to the priestess (nin-dingir) of goddess Bau.² There are also some cases where released men were placed on registers (kurum₂~gal₂) of the temple of Shu-Sin (the divine-king),³ dumu-dab₅-ba,⁴ garden,⁵ and builder.⁶ They were forced to work in other organizations, such as a royal household, a temple household, and a city-governor's household. They were not completely free, but were still in a subordinate class. Similarly, Agga was subordinate to

Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, even though he had been set free from being a war prisoner. Agga fulfilled the šagina in Kish for the sake of Gilgamesh.

In the Ur III period, Kazallu, Marada, and Apiak, cities nearby Kish, were governed by the person who fulfilled the énsi and šagina concurrently (Maeda 1992). However, most of the cities in the Sumerian region were different. Sumerian cities were not ruled by generals, but by the énsis. Their énsis originated from the leading families of the city-states, which governed in their own traditional role inherited from the early independent city-states. The cities that were governed by governor-generals were controlled more directly by the central government of Ur than the cities that were governed by the énsis. Based on the analogy with Ur III cities, I can imagine that people in those days listened to the story of Agga who came back to Kish as a general of Gilgamesh, and realized the old flourishing Kish had begun to decline and had lost its independence.

According to my interpretation, the purpose of the narration in lines 100-103 is clearly to express the glory of Gilgamesh. Before the war, Agga was a powerful antagonist of Gilgamesh, and went to war as the king of Kish, but after the war, Agga came back to Kish as a governor-general under the authority of Gilgamesh. He was no match for Gilgamesh anymore. That is, Gilgamesh alone became the hero having no rival.

Lines 104-106

Lines 104-106 explain the reason why Gilgamesh was indulgent toward Agga. These lines are usually interpreted as Gilgamesh remembering his indebtedness to Agga, and his returning of the old favor. ECTSL translated lines 104-106 as “Aga gave me breath, Aga gave me life: Aga took a fugitive into his embrace, Aga provided the fleeing bird with grain.”

However, this interpretation is open to doubt. In lines 104 and 106, the verbal aspect is *marû*, imperfect/present-future.

104 ag-ga mušen-kar-ra še bí-ib-**si-si**

106 ag-ga lú-kar-ra úr-ra bí-in-**túm-mu**

It is unusual to narrate a past event with present-future verbs. I consider the two phrases are something like a lesson, maxim, or saying, and I translate the two lines as follows:

104 Oh Agga, (people say) give barley to a wandering bird (like you). (So I

will show mercy to you.)

- 106 Oh Agga, (people say) a refugee (like you who lost your own soldiers and country) needs to find a shelter. (So I will provide protection for you.)

The victor alone can afford to be magnanimous. This is the reason why Gilgamesh did not punish Agga, but gave him a chance to live.

The verbal chain *ma-an-sum* in line 105 has usually been translated as “you (Agga) gave (vitality/life) to me.” If there were no other possible translation, this would be a serious obstacle to my interpretation. However, Sollberger has written about the verbal chain *ma-an-sum*: “*ma-an-sum*, PN, abbreviated form of a PN of the pattern DN-mansumu = *DN-iddinam* ‘DN has given me (a son, etc.)’” (Sollberger 1966, 170). In this context, the grammatical subject does not need to be the 2nd person. In fact, Sollberger cited an example of *ma-an-sum* “he gave something to me” in an Ur III letter.

ur^d-da-mu, ù-na-a-du₁₁, šà-gu₄ 7 máš, **ma-an-sum**, u₄ 1 gu₄-kam, hé-na-si-ge, na-mi-gur-re

“Say to Ur-Damu: **The oxherd (3. person) has given me (1. person) 7 goats**, ..., let him ... for him. He must not argue” (Sollberger 1966, 213).

This example supports my interpretation that *ma-an-sum* means “life/vitality was given to me (not to you).”

In another manuscript, *ma-an-sum* is changed to a variation, *mu-e-sum*, which is usually translated as the 2. person, “you gave ...” However, Thomsen wrote about the infix *-e-*: “*-e-* occurs also rather frequently in contexts where it cannot denote the 2. person, for instance: me.lám-bi (...) aratta^{ki}-a túg-gin₇ ba-e-dul gada-gin₇ ba-e-búr “‘Its radiance covered Aratta like a garment, enveloped it like linen’” (Enmerkar and Ensuhkeshdana 13) (Thomsen 1984, 150).

Since the verbal chain *mu-e-sum* is not always translated into the 2. person, *mu-e-sum* does not invalidate my interpretation, although I am not able to explain why the verbal chain *mu-e-sum* appears as a variation of *ma-an-sum*.

Notes

¹ SNS 178: I **šu-bar** PN, é-^dnanna ba-an-ku₄.

² TEL 229: I **šu-bar** PN1 dumu PN2 uš-bar, nu-^{giš}kiri₆ nin-dingir-^dba-ú ba-an-ku₄.

³ TuT 277: I **šu-bar** PN1 dumu PN2, hé-dab₅ PN3 dumu PN4, **kúrum** é-^dšu-^dsuen mu-gál.

⁴ TCT 728: **šu-bar** 60 silà PN1 dumu PN2 a-tu₅-a, **kúrum** dumu-dab₅-ba mu-gál.

⁵ MVN 7 176: I PN1 dumu PN2 mu ki-A-šè, **kúrum** ^{giš}kiri₆-^{giš}-gal-gal mu-gál, **šu-bar-ra**, ki PN3

ugula-ta itu-vi u₄-22-ba-zal.
⁶ SNS 155: I **šu-bar** PN1, PN2 dumu PN3 ba-an-**ku₄**, **kúrum** dumu diri šudim-ka mu-gál.

Abbreviations

ETCSL = The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature; MVN 7 = Pettinato and Picchioni 1978; SNS = Gomi and Sato 1990; TCT = Lafont and Yildiz 1989; TEL = Virolleaud and Lambert 1968; TuT = Risner 1901.

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