

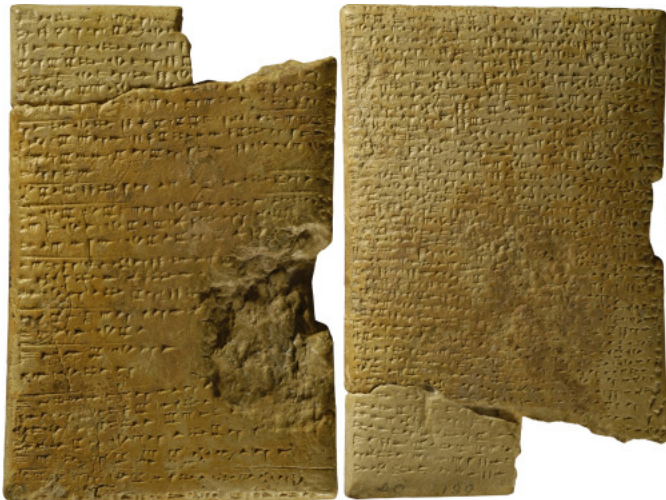
Slightly Alive Translations

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KTU 1.23 (Dawn and Dusk/The Gentle Gods)

(<https://mostlydeadlanguages.tumblr.com/post/171802743513/ktu-123-dawn-and-duskthe-gentle-gods>)

March 12, 2018 (<https://mostlydeadlanguages.tumblr.com/post/171802743513/ktu-123-dawn-and-duskthe-gentle-gods>)



It's been a while since my last translation, but I hope you enjoy this one as much as I do. It's an odd Ugaritic text: the first half is a fragmented mish-mash of ritual instructions and mythic imagery, while the second half is a ribald tale about Ilu, the Father-God, and the consequences of his libido. I have included several notes to outline my own read of the text, but I want to emphasize that many of its elements are still debated by scholars, so you should take my observations with several grains of salt. Notably, I argue that in the "bawdy comedy" section, the text includes a fairly explicit depiction of two women having sex with each other.

I welcome the Gentle Gods — [1]
 the graceful sons of the Sun-Go[ddess],
 those granted honor from the heights, [2]
 in the wilderness and the barren plateaus.

... upon their heads,
 and ...

Feast abundantly upon the feast!
 Drink abundantly of the bubbly wine!
 Grant peace to the king!
 Grant peace to the queen,
 to the guests and the guards!

The Death-Lord is seated:

in his hand, a staff of sterility;
in his hand, a staff of widowhood.

The vine-pruner prunes it;

the vine-tier ties it;
like a vine, he drops it on his death-field. [3]

Seven times, he says it over the platform,
and the guests reply.

And the field is the field of Ilu,
the field of Athirat and Lady Mercy.

Over the fire, seven times, the youth(s), a great shout:
coriander in milk, mint in butter.

Then over the cauldron, seven times again:
incen[se, in]cense.

Lady Mercy goes out to hunt [...]
She clothes the gent[le] youth [...]
And the name of the guests [...]

The gods' dwellings are eight, eight [...]
[...] seven times [...]

Lapis lazuli, red carnelian [...]
[...] the two lords [...] [4]

Yes, I welcome the Gentle Gods,
the ravenous pair, born the [same] day,
they who suckle the nipple of Athirat [5]
[...] the Sun-Goddess, who tends to their vulnerability.
[...] and grapes.

Grant peace to the guests and the guards,
walking with the sacrifice of gentleness.

In the field of Ilu,
the field of Athirat and Lady Mercy,
the gods dwell.

[Ilu walks along] the sea shore;
he strides the shore of the Great Deep.
Ilu [sees] two women mounting each other —
two women mounting each other, head to “cauldron.” [6]
Watch! One sinks down.
Watch! One rises up.
Watch! One shouts, “daddy, daddy!”
Watch! One shouts “mommy, mommy!”

Ilu's member lengthens like the sea —
yes, Ilu's member [rises] like the tide.
Ilu's member lengthened like the sea —
yes, Ilu's member [rose] like the tide.

Ilu seizes the two women mounting each other,
the two women mounting each other, head to “cauldron.”
He seizes [them] and puts them in his house.

Ilu has pulled out his “staff”;
Ilu has palmed the rod with his hand.
Raising it, he shoots skyward:

he has shot a bird from the sky!
 Plucking it, he puts it on the embers:
 in this way, Ilu ravishes the women.

 If the two women shout, "Oh husband, husband,
 pulling out your staff,
 palming the rod with your hand!
 Watch out! You're roasting the bird on the fire,
 but you've burned it on the coals."
 Then they are wives indeed, wives of Ilu,
 wives of Ilu forever.

 But if the two women shout, "Oh daddy, daddy,
 pulling out your staff,
 palming the rod with your hand!
 Watch out! You're roasting the bird on the fire,
 but you've burned it on the coals."
 Then they are daughters indeed, daughters of Ilu,
 daughters of Ilu forever. [7]

 And then the two women shout, "Oh husband, husband,
 pulling out your staff,
 palming the rod with your hand!
 Watch out! You're roasting the bird on the fire,
 but you've burned it on the coals."
 They are wives of Husband Ilu,
 wives of Ilu forever.

He leans down and kisses their lips.
 Oh, oh! Their lips are sweet,
 sweet as pomegranates.
 With kissing comes conception;
 with lovemaking comes climax.
 The two squat down and give birth
 to Dawn and Dusk.

A message arrives for Ilu:
 "The wives of Ilu gave birth!"
 "To what did they give birth?"
 "To the two boys, Dawn and Dusk!"
 "Raise a gift to the Great Sun-Goddess,
 and to the unchanging stars."

He leans down and kisses their lips.
 Oh, oh! Their lips are sweet,
 sweet as pomegranates.
 With kissing comes conception;
 with lovemaking comes climax. [8]
 [Ilu] sits down [...]
 he counts to five [...]
 [...] ten, the pair is complete.
 The two squat down and give birth
 to the Gentle Gods:
 Devourers of the day, sons of one day,
 they who suckle the nipple of the breast.

A message arrives for Ilu:
 "The wives of Ilu gave birth!"
 "To what did they give birth?"
 "To the Gentle Gods:
 "Devourers of the day, sons of one day,
 they who suckle the nipple of the breast of the lady.
 "One lip on the earth,
 one lip in the sky.
 "Everything goes into their mouths:
 the birds of the sky,
 and the fish of the sea.
 "And they stand from one edge to the other,
 devouring to the right and to the left.
 "Nothing in their mouths can sate them." [9]

"Wives that I married,
 sons that I fathered:
 "Raise a gift

from within the holy wilderness.
 “You will be refugees there —
 refugees among the stones
 and among the trees,
 “for a total of seven years,
 eight circuits of time.”

The Gentle Gods journey to the field;
 they hunt at the edge of the wilderness.
 Then they approach the Guardian of Farmland [10]
 and call out to the Guardian of Farmland:
 “Oi, guardian! Guardian! Open up!”
 So he opens up a passage near them,
 and they enter.
 “If you’ve got bread,
 give it over, so we can eat!
 “If you’ve got wine,
 give it over, so we can drink!”

The Guardian of Farmland answers them,
 “There’s wine that comes from Th[...]...”
 ... appears.
 He serves a measure of his wine ...
 And his friend fills up with wine ...

[1] “Gentle Gods” — or perhaps “Kindly Gods.” Basically, some scholars argue that the name is a euphemism, like the British “Fair Folk” (fae) or the Greek “Kindly Ones” (Furies). The polite name for them attempts to flatter and appease.

[2] “Those granted honor from the heights” — a very difficult line. For instance, another possible translation is, “Those who give a city from above.”

[3] Most of the terms in this evocative section are clear, but their (presumably metaphorical?) meaning is far from apparent. With great uncertainty, I read this as a metonymic description of the activities of winter: a season of sterility, when grapevines are pruned and fields cleared. Only by destroying the vines (i.e. welcoming the activity of Motu/Death) can the gardeners ensure a fertile spring and summer.

[4] This section is very broken, but I am personally intrigued by the mention of lapis lazuli and carnelian. Most scholars interpret these as colors (blue and red) rather than the stones themselves, but this section comes shortly after the discussion of two food-substances and a cauldron. In Gilgamesh, a pair of lapis and carnelian bowls are part of the funeral rites for Enkidu. The mineral pair also appears in other Mesopotamian contexts, e.g. a birth charm to predict a child’s sex, in which lapis symbolizes a boy and carnelian symbolizes a girl. So while red and blue clothing is certainly a possible reading, I take the gems literally. This also affects the following word — *šr* can mean a singer or a prince, and I view it as a return to the twin Gentle Gods.

[5] Athirat is of course the equivalent of Hebrew “Asherah,” the mother-goddess and wife of Ilu.

[6] “Two women mounting each other, head to ‘cauldron.’” This is certainly my most radical divergence from standard translations, but it’s also a translation of a section that has been a difficult crux for scholars. “Two-women-mounting-each-other” is a single word in Ugaritic, appearing nowhere outside this passage, so my breakdown of its etymology is speculative, but it’s along very similar lines to the standard interpretation (“two-women-bobbing-up-and-down”). (*Technical explanation: I agree that it’s a Št participle, but I connect it to the Šp in KTU 1.5.v.21, which clearly refers to sexual mounting. So if the Š passive means “to be mounted,” I speculate that the Š reflexive means “to mount each other.”*) “Cauldron” appeared earlier in the text as a ritual implement, but it’s the same root word that appears in Song of Songs 7:2 as a metaphor for the navel/vulva/loins, overflowing with “spiced wine.” In short, I believe that this describes two women engaging in oral sex with each other.

Since the following sections involve overt ribald humor, and since whatever Ilu sees causes immediate arousal, this meaning is hardly out of place in the passage. However, if I’m correct, this would still be a remarkable precedent, since I’m unaware of any other ancient Near Eastern text that describes details of sexual acts between women (as we do see in Greek texts, for instance). If any fellow Ugaritic scholars are reading this, I would welcome your thoughts on the topic.


[7] “Daughters of Ilu for all time” — this designation does not preclude a sexual relationship. (After all, Ilu has already “ravished” the pair!) Ba’al had three “daughters” who were also his wives/consorts, and adoption may have been an ancient legal option for betrothing a woman too young to marry yet. Perhaps — but this is a guess — the distinction is whether the two women are post-pubescent, i.e. able to conceive Ilu’s children.

[8] One of the fundamental debates around this passage concerns this repetition. Did the wives bear two sets of twins (Dawn and Dusk, and then the Gentle Gods)? Or is this an example of ancient narrative repetition, where the text describes the same event in subsequent passages? I personally lean toward the latter — I see the text as equating Dawn and Dusk with the Gentle Gods, rather than depicting them as the older siblings of the pair.































[9] What’s going on with these terrifyingly ravenous gods? Analyses differ, but here’s my theory (predicated on the assumption that they are equated with Dawn and Dusk). Dawn and Dusk are literally the two bookends on each day; they “consume” the sun, then regurgitate it each morning, and nothing can escape the fall of night. As long as each dusk brings another dawn, equilibrium is maintained. But during the winter, the days are growing shorter — which means that Dawn and Dusk are moving closer to each other, gobbling up more of each successive day. Therefore, a midwinter ritual might seek to reverse that pattern, so that Dawn and Dusk don’t continue until the whole world is enveloped in darkness. Up until this point, the sources of light included the Sun-Goddess and the stars, but the introduction of Dawn and Dusk destabilizes the sun’s reign, creating a crisis that must be addressed by Ilu.













[10] “The Guardian of Farmland”: “farmland” is simply the term for soil that has been tilled and sown, i.e. not wilderness. The Gentle Gods have reached the border between wilderness and civilization, and are met by a guard. Although their interaction is broken, I believe that this is the mythic interaction underlying the ritual at the beginning: in order to placate the ravenous Gentle Gods, a feast of food and wine is offered to them — but not free access to the civilized world.

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