

Marcin Z. Paszke¹

Divine boats má ^dnin-líl-la and má-gur₈ mah ^dEn-líl-lá ^dNin-líl in the light of Sumerian literary texts

The article refers to the two so-called divine boats: the first dedicated to the goddess Ninlil (má ^dnin-líl-la), the second dedicated to the divine couple, Enlil and Ninlil (má-gur₈ mah ^dEn-líl-lá ^dNin-líl). These ceremonial barges are known from Sumerian cuneiform sources, attested mainly in the reign of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2123–2004 BC). Texts related to the divine boats testify that they were made of precious materials and stand out from ordinary vessels, since their main purpose was to carry statues of particular gods and cultic offerings respectively. The paper tries to summarize knowledge about those objects, focusing on their relation to cultic festivals and riverine pilgrimages performed in Nippur and Tummal.

These cultic activities speak about the traditional mythological motif focused on the vivid plot in which Ninlil was seduced by Enlil in Tummal. All textual sources prompt to the conclusion that the divine boats played an important role in cultic performance mirroring a well-defined mythological reality.

Key words: divine boats in Mesopotamia, ceremonial boats in Mesopotamia, cultic journey of Enlil and Ninlil's boat

Southern Mesopotamia was a marshy and swampy area closed by two, main watercourses that cross the alluvial plain – the Tigris and Euphrates. The volatile flow of the Mesopotamian rivers and their tributaries affected the everyday life of local people (Buringh 1957: 31–41; Postgate 1992: 173). This land was easily approachable by boat through the network of artificial canals which linked the Sumerian city-states. It seems that a great deal of travel, transport and communication was waterborne (Potts 1997: 122). Nonetheless we know that local waterways were not only utilized for secular purposes but also for activities of a religious character, since they might be seen as cultic tracts for gods travelling to certain sanctuaries.

¹ Uniwersytet Gdański; marcin.paszke@hotmail.com.

Ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform texts note the existence of special barges called má-gur₈-dingir-ra, Akkadian *makurru* playing a significant role in Sumerian ritual. Those vessels were regarded as divine boats, as is indicated by their name. Most of the information related to divine boats comes from neo-Sumerian documents dated to the third dynasty of Ur (2123–2004 BC). The problem of divine boats was first challenged by A. Salonen as a part of his monumental work on Mesopotamian boats and boat building under the title *Die Wasserfahrzeuge in Babylonien* (Salonen 1939). The results of his study were summed up and recalled as *Götterboot A* (Salonen 1969: 463–464). Divine boats were also investigated by N. Schneider in the short article *Götterschiffe in Ur III-Reich* (Schneider 1946: 7–13). As far as I know there are no monographic publications strictly devoted to the so-called divine boats, but there are many works which mention ceremonial barges (e.g. Sallaberger 1993: passim).

According to cuneiform texts divine boats might be divided into two categories. The first consists of boats described as má (*eleppu*) + DN (e.g. má ^dDumuzi-da) and the second as má-gur₈ (*eleppu makurru*) + DN (e.g. má-gur₈-ra ^dNin-giz-zi-da).

The meaning of the word ma₂-gur₈ is not clear. The morpheme gur₈ can be translated “high” or “deep” (Ellermeier 2005: 173). That is why A. Salonen identifies *makurru* as a “boat with prow and stern going high upward” (Salonen 1939: 12–13), which clearly corresponds to the boat iconography in Mesopotamian glyptic art, while CAD speaks about a “deep-going boat” (*makurru* in: CAD 1977: 141; comment on the ma₂-gur₈ in: Oppenheim 1948: 79). Inim Kiengi II refers to *makurru* as a cargo ship, indicating its secular function, rather than its religious character, which was noticed as early as the pioneering work of A. Salonen (listing ^{gis}má-gur₈ as “Flußschiff”, “Lastschiff”, “Transportschiff”: Hübner, Reizammer 1984: 650; Salonen 1939: 13–14).

Divine boats were utilized to carry divine images and offerings during religious festivities. A group of Sumerian literary compositions concerns boat journeys made by the gods, and there is some non-literary evidence, which confirms that regular journeys really took place in the ED Period and under the Third Dynasty of Ur (Black, Green 2004: 112). The cult statues were transported about the country, between local cult places, accompanied by the king and members of the temple and state management.

The construction of new divine boats was an important event at state level, because they are always listed in the Sumerian annual accounts alongside the construction of divine thrones, statues, temples, royal marriages and even the conquest of new lands (Schneider 1946: 5–7; Salonen 1939: 58; texts 108, 118, 120, 128 in: Mercer 1946: 11 (AS 3), 12 (ŠŠ 4, 6), 13 (IS 5); Ungnad 1938: 140 (Š 4), 141 (Š 33), 145 (IS 2)). Divine boats were kept in a special building called, in Sumerian, é-ma₂-gur₈-ra, “temple/house of *makurru* boat” (Salonen 1969: 463). Moreover it is believed that *elep ili* were regarded cult objects, worshipped by the Sumerians.

This thesis, according to N. Schneider, is reinforced by cuneiform texts, recording offerings of crops, oil and animals to the divine boats (Schneider 1946: 10).

The construction of the *makurru* boats varied from ordinary crafts due to their extraordinary building materials. According to Sumerian texts the boats were mainly made of several components – wood, reed, and bitumen (Ferrara 1973: 47–50, 84–86; commentaries 39–53: 115–119). The most remarkable issue is that precious metals like silver (Schneider 1946: 10), gold (Legrain 1947: 332), and copper (Legrain 1947: 1261) and also semi-precious stones (col. 11: 27–30 in: Civil 1967: 33) were used by craftsmen, *kug-dím* (Salonen 1969: 463), in the *elep ili* boatbuilding process.

Among the divine boats known from literary tradition two vessels in particular deserve special attention – a boat dedicated to the goddess Ninlil (má ^dnin-líl-la) and the boat of the divine partners Enlil and Ninlil (má-gur₈ mah ^dEn-líl-lá ^dNin-líl), both connected with Nippur and Tummal. First of all it needs to be stressed that Enlil, “Lord Wind” (commentary on Enlil’s name in: Hayes 1990: 77) was one of the most important and powerful god in the Sumerian pantheon, and the goddess Ninlil was his wife. According to Sumerian mythology Enlil was the ruler of the gods and the world (Bottéro 2004: 46; Black, Green 2004: 76, 140). In Sumerian literary tradition Nippur was regarded as the religious capital of Sumer. Though Nippur has never been the king’s residence all Mesopotamian rulers treated it with respect. Because of that many rulers were carrying out building projects of religious character there, making offerings of the spoils of war and cultic objects to Enlil’s temple. There were many religious buildings located in Nippur, but the most important were the main temple of Enlil É-kur, the sanctuary of Ninlil Ki-ùr, Ninurta’s temple É-šu-me-ša and finally Inanna’s temple Báradúr-gar-ra (Klein 2001: 533–534). According to Jacobsen’s theory the importance of Nippur was due to the fact that already, in the ED I period, it was a place where an assembly (*ukkin*) of a military union of Sumerian city-states, called Kiengir Ligue, gathered (Jacobsen 1957: 106, Halloran 2006: 138). It must be noted that many scholars disagree with Jacobsen, pointing out lack of sufficient evidence to support his theory. They prefer to understand the special role of Nippur as a result of Enlil’s leading position in the Mesopotamian pantheon and the fact that his main temple was located there, which according to the “Tummal Inscription” was constructed as early as the reign of king Enmebaragesi of Kiš (Klein 2001: 534; Kramer 1963: 48). As Tummal would have it, it was a cult centre of Ninlil, somewhere downstream of Nippur², designated by one of the Sumerian temple hymns as “Primeval city, cane-brake, with beautifully grown mature reed and young reed” (Sjöberg, Bergmann 1969: 19).

The cultic journey of Ninlil’s boat má ^dnin-líl-la was probably a part of the Tummal Festival, celebrated in the 8th month of the year in the cultic calendar of

² See: (Yoshikawa 1989: 289), based on the cuneiform sources locates Tummal midway between Nippur and Šuruppak, suggesting that it might be Tell Dilhim.

Nippur (Klein 2001: 537; Sallaberger 1993: 139). It is known that a day before the festivity, various offerings of animals, predominantly oxen and sheep were made. Next, some “temple rituals” were performed at the temples of Enlil and Ninlil and “overnight rituals” at the temples of the other deities of Nippur. It seems that this religious observance was brought to an end by livestock offerings, being a part of *sizkur*₂ *ki má* ^dNin-lil-la, “rituals at the place of Ninlil’s boat” (Sallaberger 1993: 51, 139)³. According to W. Sallaberger it fits other literary sources describing the riverine journey of Ninlil’s boat sailing between Nippur and Tummal (Sallaberger 1993: 139⁴). This cultic pilgrimage is attested by the hymn *Šulgi R* wherein Ninlil’s barge is called *má-gur*₈ *mah* or simply *gi-dirig*⁵. The hymn praises king *Šulgi* as the true builder of Ninlil’s boat in following words: “Oh barque... Your Lady Ninlil, commanded your construction. She entrusted it to the faithful provider, king *Šulgi*...” (Black, Robson, Cunningham, Zólyomi 2004: 114). The construction of Ninlil’s boat is mentioned in *Š8 mu má* ^dnin-lil-lá *ba-du*₈ “The year when the boat of Ninlil was caulked” (Frayne 1997: 97). Then the story tells, that king *Šulgi* established a special festival and invited the gods to Nippur, to commemorate this event. It is known that after the bath which took place in the city Ninlil and Enlil leave the temple aboard a ceremonial boat (Black, Robson, Cunningham, Zólyomi 2004: 115). Unfortunately, the text is not fully preserved, so it is impossible to restore the riverine trip in any detail. As a matter of fact the text does mention the god Ninurta, king *Šulgi* and several cultic objects located on Ninlil’s boat (a five-headed sceptre, *mitum* sceptre, standard and a spear), but it is hard to trace any coherent religious activity during this voyage. The destination of Ninlil’s boat is clearly formulated, “...it [the boat] sails off into the reed-beds of Enlil’s Tummal” (Black, Robson, Cunningham, Zólyomi 2004: 116). Similarly to the literary composition “Enki and the World Order”⁶ it is quite possible that the boat’s crew, called in the text “ferry-men” sang religious songs for the goddess Ninlil. Finally, the boat reaches Tummal, where a special banquet is held, and king *Šulgi* is blessed by the gods in these words: “I will prolong the nights of the crown that was placed upon your head by holy An, and I will extend the days of the holy scepter that was given to you by Enlil” (Black, Robson, Cunningham, Zólyomi 2004: 116).

According to some authors this particular fragment reveals a basic purpose of the Tummal festival held during the reign of *Šulgi*, which was in reality a good occasion for the renewal of his kingship. From this point of view the Tummal Festival appears to be an important event at state level, which would explain the presence of foreign emissaries during its celebration (Sharlach 2005: 18–22).

³ For more information about the offerings made to Enlil, Ninlil, and Suen in Tummal see: (Ohe 1986: 121–126).

⁴ Pay attention to footnote no. 648 where author quotes ^gis³*má* ^dNin-lil-lá and ^gis³*má* Tum-ma-al listed on OB list Hh IV (MSL 1957: 176) 299f.

⁵ See: (MSL 1957: 77) where *gi(a)-dirig(-a)* means “the raft”.

⁶ See lines 111–112 in: (Al Fouadi 1969: 91, 119–120) where we read: “The (stroke)-callers makes the oars draw in unison. Sing for me sweet songs, cause the river to rejoice”.

The large number of participants during the Tummal Festival quoted by some texts was probably due to the royal beer sale kaš-dé-a lugal provided to the lieges (Sallaberger 1993: 143–144). It was suggested by W. Heimpel that in the course of the festivities local people may have occupied the river or canal banks, celebrating, drinking beer and eating bread, awaiting the ceremonial boat (Heimpel 1990: 207–211).

After Šulgi's death the local festival was very likely modified. It may be noticed that in comparison to King Šulgi, who was the founder of Ninlil's boat má ^dnin-líl-la, the new ruler Šu-sin slightly modified the name of a new boat má-gur₈ mah ^dEn-líl-lá ^dNin-líl, and dedicated it to Enlil and Ninlil, which is confirmed by ŠS8: mu ^dŠU-^dsīn(EN-ZU) lugal ur^{ki}-ma-ke₄ má-gur₈ mah ^den-líl ^dnin-líl-ra mu-ne-dím, “The year when, divine Šu-sin, king of Ur, built a great boat of Enlil and Ninlil” (Mercer 1946: 12). A description of this affair is found in the Šu-Sin's “Historical Inscription”, where we read that the king built the great *makurru* boat for Enlil and Ninlil, so they could sail to Tummal: “Toward the cane-brake of Enlil's Tummal, toward Ninlil's place of joy, Enlil together with Ninlil sailed” (Civil 1967: 34). Similarly to the aforementioned festivals this religious activity was probably enhanced by music, since the text enumerates singers nar, “house of the lyre” é-balag and some incantation songs šir-kù.

H. Behrens might be correct in arguing that the ritual journey of Enlil and Ninlil was a reflection of the Sumerian myth “Enlil and Ninlil”, which was performed at least until the end of Amar-Suen's reign, commemorating the love-story between the two deities. To support this theory he quotes the so-called “Tummal Inscription” which states that “From the years of Amar-Suen until King Ibbi-Suen, the kings choose Enmegalana by extispicy as the high priest of Inanna of Unug, Ninlil came regularly to the Tummal” (Behrens 1978: 123–124). According to the myth Nunammir (Enlil) had first seduced and raped Ninlil in the cane-brake of Tummal, thereupon his firstborn child, the moon god – Suen, was begot. The text clearly indicates that Ninlil was the young woman ki-sikil-tur, who had been trying to resist young Enlil, called guruš-tur, but it was meaningless: “My vulva is young, it doesn't know pregnancy, my lips are young and don't know kissing” (Behrens 1978: 214, 221), however Enlil gets what he wants: “He is having intercourse with her, he is kissing her. During one intercourse, at one kiss he is pouring the semen of Suen – Ašimbabbar into her body” (Behrens 1978: 215, 222). Because of his disgraceful behavior Enlil was banished from Nippur and the text describes how he went down to the netherworld afterwards, where Ninlil constantly followed him. In the realm of the dead Enlil had sex with Ninlil several times more and begot three chthonic deities – Nergal, Ninazu i Enbilulu.

The case of Ninlil's boat is very intriguing since it was noticed that her ritual journey may be much older than neo-Sumerian tradition, leading back even to the reign of Agga, who was a son of Enmebaragesi, king of Kiš (c. 2600 BC). According to H. Behrens a laconic hint in “Tummal Inscription” referring to the beginning of Ninlil's cult in Tummal suggests that her riverine journey might

have been a part of the Sumerian religious tradition already in the ED II period (Behrens 1978: 125–126): “Enmebaragesi the king, in this very city (Nippur) built the House of Enlil. Agga, the son of Enmebaragesi made the Tummal pre-eminent, brought Ninlil to the Tummal. For the first time, The Tummal fell into ruin” (Kramer 1963: 48–49).

It seems that the divine boats má^dnin-líl-la and má-gur₈ mah^dEn-líl-lá^dNin-líl played a special role in Sumerian ritual, being the most suitable means of transport for the gods and their attendants in the marshy area of Southern Mesopotamia. Boats enabled them to travel easily from one cultic place to another via the extended canal system. They could have naturally housed larger cargo than the two and four-wheeled carts known to be used in Sumerian culture. The feedback given by Sumerian texts allow us to speculate with high probability that Enlil and Ninlil’s presence on the boat is a metaphor for real statues loaded together with offerings. Barges had to furnish some cultic objects, crew, temple representatives and as well as the king. Its special adornments, which covered the hull, made by silversmiths, kug-dím, might have been of special artistic value, thus divine boats sailing down the river might have been a true attraction for ordinary people awaiting them along the river and canal banks. What is more, if our general understanding of the Tummal Festival is correct and the riverine pilgrimage does correspond with Sumerian mythology, divine boats need to be understood as a symbol of fertility. Natural power, embodied by sexual intercourse between Enlil and Ninlil as indicated by mythological tradition, may have been kept only by regularly made journeys reflecting the story of how Ninlil was seduced by Enlil in Tummal.

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