



Varicolored Wool in Ancient Treatment Rituals

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ABSTRACT

The first use of wool occurred in ancient Mesopotamia as a result of the domestication and selective breeding of sheep. As civilization developed in southern Mesopotamia in the late 5th and 4th millennia BC, evidence from that time implies that pig and cattle farming began to give way to nomadic goat and sheep-herding. This development can be seen by looking at the economy of the region, where sheep became a status symbol. The trade network clearly demonstrates the status symbol and the significance of wool for that region. It was among the most significant goods exported to nearby civilizations. The literature of the Mesopotamians reveals the significance of wool in terms of the divine character. It was given to temple inhabitants for use in a variety of ways. For example, it was used as payment for goods and services and it was initially used to produce blankets, pillows, cushions, carpets, ropes, chariots, equestrian equipment, and textiles. This thing also had value as a ceremonial object for ancient Mesopotamians and, indirectly, Hittites in Anatolia. The use of multicolored wool, particularly in these ancient societies' healing rituals, is quite astounding. One of the most prevalent items in ancient Mesopotamian medicinal ritual practices was wool of various colors, which was mentioned in therapeutic ritual literature. Many of these customs were passed on to the Hittites through the substantial commercial network with Anatolia during the Assyrian trade colony period. Hittite religious rites utilized wool of various hues. Hittite society relied on wool to absorb and purify dangers and evils in religious life. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role that wool had in ancient Mesopotamian and Hittite healing rites.

Keywords: Disease in Antiquity, Ancient Mesopotamia, Treatment Rituals, Varicolored Wool



Introduction

Trade-related Mesopotamian literature, particularly those from the Old Babylonian period in the early half of the second millennium BC, put Mesopotamia forward as the land of wool (Breniquet & Michel, 2014, p. 1). The domestication and selective breeding of sheep led to the first instances of wool exploitation. Archaeozoological evidence suggests that the husbandry of pigs and cattle started to give way to nomadic goat and sheep-herding in southern Mesopotamia as urbanization began to spread there in the late 5th and 4th millennia BC. The economy of the Ubaidian chiefdoms, in which sheep evolved into an animal of prestige, should be considered proof of this development (Breniquet & Michel, 2014, p. 2).

The sign of prestige and the importance of wool for that region is clear in the trade network. It was one of the most important export items to neighboring civilizations. The Old Assyrian period's written record, which spans roughly 1970–1715 BC and corresponds to the early Middle Bronze Age in archaeological terms, provides a wealth of details about the economic and social conditions in the vast network of Assyrian trading settlements that were spread throughout modern-day Turkey. The site produced 23,000 inscribed artifacts, which is significant evidence of the Assyrians' long-distance international trade in precious fabrics and tin. Copper, locally manufactured textiles, and wool were the three principal goods traded in this transaction (Dercksen, 2004, pp. 181–190). The documentation mostly refers to wool as a trading commodity. Although there is little information available on production, processing, and consumption, certain adjectives used in the written record can provide some information (Lassen, 2014, p. 258).

The importance of wool in terms of divine aspects is revealed in Mesopotamian literary works. In Sumerian debate, the fundamental components of Sumerian civilization were occasionally the subject of incisive analysis, which tended to emphasize their use by the human race rather than their economic significance. Thus, a discussion of grain and sheep declares them to be the divinely appointed twin cornerstones of Sumerian society (Foster, 2014, p. 116).

Many different techniques and objectives were employed with wool. It was used to make blankets, pillows, cushions, carpets, ropes, chariot and equine equipment, fabrics and felts; it was distributed to temple dwellers for use in various ways; it served as payment for products and services (Biga, 2014, p. 142). Besides these usages for Ancient Mesopotamians and in a roundabout way Hittites in Anatolia, this item carried value as a ritual object. Especially in the treatment rituals of these ancient societies, the usage of varicolored wool is so impressive.

Disease and Treatment in Antiquity

Religion, magic, and medicine were inseparable concepts in antiquity. Acts that could be included in the field of medicine include ritual practices and spells that were central to

the belief system. Even if the method of treatment was aimed at physical healing, scientific reality permeated religious reality and was part of faith, which was the only absolute value for ancient people. In this context, there was a collective practice in ancient Mesopotamia and contemporaneous societies to eradicate an individual's illness, to restore them, and to end their suffering (Jastrow, 1914, p. 42; Biggs, 1995, p. 5; Benzel et al., 2010, p. 42).

Evidence of medicine and treatment methods in ancient Mesopotamia can be found primarily in medical texts as the main source. In addition, letters and other literary texts are among the sources that shed light on the medical knowledge of the period. The earliest medical prescription obtained so far is in Sumerian and belongs to the III Ur Dynasty. Medical texts were most abundant in the Neo-Assyrian period and most of them came from the library of Asurbanipal. In the second millennium BC, there were not many medical texts in Mesopotamia. However, numerous medical texts from the Neo-Babylonian period have been found elsewhere, such as in Hattusa, the capital of the Hittite Kingdom (Biggs, 1995, p. 1).

The texts consisted primarily of complaints, herbal concoctions, instructions, and ingredients, but also of prescriptions for various techniques involving supernatural forces, including magical instructions for warding off demons and warding off the diseases they caused. In this context, health texts contained instructions combining two types of treatment: medical (ařutu) and magical (ařiputu).

Ařipu used a combination of spells to support the herbal treatments practiced by Ařu. Many gods came to Ařipu's aid in healing rituals. Ama, the sun god, represented justice by healing someone who did not deserve to be sick. Enki/Ea, the god of fresh water, was the greatest resource deity that ařipu could consult, especially in purification rituals. Ea was also the god who transmitted medical knowledge to humanity through his son Ařalluhi (later known as Marduk). The goddess Gula was the protector of Ařipu as the healing deity who understood illness and of Ařu, the curative specialist, who was described as a kind of doctor. The goddess Gula was the patroness of Ařipu, the healing god who recognized illness, and Ařu, the curative specialist, who was described as a kind of doctor. Gula was also the mother of the god Damu, another god of healing, who was known to drive away demons and bind broken bonds. From these gods, humanity was endowed with a piece of magic that helped in healing (Scurlock, 2005, p. 313).

Eliade, who examined the causes of disease within a historical framework, stated that in primitive societies, the disease was believed to be caused by an external element linked to demons or spells, such as touching a non-pure object that interfered with the organism, breaking the laws of ritual, or it was believed to be a destiny from the divine world. In this context, he emphasized that the first cause of the disease was located in the magical order (Eliade, 2002, p. 74). Since the main sources of diseases in Mesopotamian society were linked to supernatural forces, it is quite plausible that the solution was also in mystical

areas and ceremonial practices accompanied by the priest Ašipu. In the reality created by society, treatment practices turned into ritual practices in which a wide variety of objects were used.

The Use of Wool in Medical Applications

It is understood from ancient written texts that many different objects were used in the treatment rituals practiced in ancient Mesopotamia and the Hittites where the trade network developed with Assur. One of the most interesting features of these objects is the use of wool of different colors, the purpose of which is open to many interpretations. A great deal of detailed information can be gleaned from the clear instructions in Mesopotamian healing ritual texts dating to the middle of the second millennium. In addition to the instructions that have become a part of the ritual tradition, such as the organization of the ritual setting, the preparation of incense, the making of offerings to specific deities, and the practice of libation, other necessary directives are also clearly stated. The instructions also include a warning to dispose of ritual equipment after all practices.

In Mesopotamia, wool, a product primarily used to meet the need for clothing, also appears in many rituals, in different colors, and for different purposes. Goff mentions that knots were tied in red or blue wool and precious stones such as agate and lapis lazuli were placed on these knots to protect against danger, to maintain good fortune, or to prevent a pregnant woman from miscarrying (Goff, 1956, p. 18). In the example of a ritual applied to a pregnant woman who miscarries, wool was used along with precious metals. The treatment ritual text discovered in Uruk describes a ritual for the healing of a woman who suffered multiple miscarriages and eventually became pregnant but became ill due to the miscarriages. The ritual contains three different rituals within itself.

The first ritual of it involved the preparation of two amulets. At sunset, the woman was taken to a separate place. She was shaved and her hair was placed on a piece of skin, which was placed in a new leather pouch and tied around her neck. Copper beads, lapis lazuli stones, masculine stones, and magnetic bloodstones, were strung on a string and placed on red wool. These were wrapped in three balls of red wool and put in the woman's right hand (Scurlock, 2001, pp. 215-216).

Wool was most commonly used in rituals to cure illnesses caused by supernatural evil forces. To protect against certain diseases caused by demons, the patient was instructed to do the following: "Spin white and black wool into yarn. Tie the white wool in front and at the top of the bed. Give the spun black wool to his left hand." (Jastrow, 1898, p. 290; Pinches, 1906, p. 112). The Muššu (rubbing) treatment ritual also involved wool and binding. "Bind his hands and feet with the wool of a lamb and a child, and wrap red wool around the bed" (Böck, 2002, p. 7). To cure a patient haunted by a ghost, wool was tied in various colors around the patient's head to ward off the ghost (Goff, 1956, p. 19).

The motif of spinning and tying woolen yarn is also found in the burning rituals of “Šurpu”. In the Šurpu ritual, the sick person did not know exactly what he had done to the gods and how he had angered them, and it was believed that he was in this state because of his own mistakes. This meant that he had to take a more active role in the ritual performed for him (Reiner, 1958, p. 36).

UTTU took the groove in her hand. Ištar prepared UTTU’s groove and made the woman with the beard sitting in front of it; she spun a piece of white wool and black wool. It became a double thread, a perfect thread, a magnificent thread, a colored thread, the thread that cuts the curse, the thread that resists the evil omen. He tied the thread that cuts the curse to this man’s head, to his hands and feet, so that Marduk, the son of Eridu, could break it with his pure hands. May he take away the thread that represents the curse, may the evil spirit stay away, may this man be purified and cleansed (Reiner, 1958, p. 34).

In the Šurpu ritual series, the purifying effect of fire through destruction is striking. The god of fire was invoked to burn all objects that symbolized the evil forces haunting a person. In this ritual, various objects such as onions, dates, straw, and wool were burned after certain procedures, and prayers were offered to the fire god during the destruction: “The sick person peels the onion and throws it into the fire, peels the dates and throws them into the fire, unties the wicker weave and throws it into the fire, pulls out a ball of wool and does the same, pulls out goat hair and does the same, pulls out red wool and does the same, and the sick person wipes himself with a handful of and throws it into the fire” (Reiner, 1958, p. 1).

The sick person would speak of the burning away of the disease in his body, skin, and veins, in the same way, that objects are treated in ritual settings, and that Girru would bring light when he burned them all. This kind of lamentation and invocation of the god of fire is common in the series. It was believed that burning objects such as onions, dates, and wool would relieve suffering.

Another medical condition in which wool was used in ancient Mesopotamia was birth rituals. Rituals associated with childbirth in Mesopotamian societies include actions centered on the moment of birth, combinations of words, symbolic objects, and the repeated utterances and required performances of the mother or birth attendants. Hammons’ study reveals that there are approximately seventy-five ritual and literary texts associated with childbirth that have been uncovered in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian birth rituals, broadly speaking, involved three distinct elements. One was a list of objects to be used in the ritual, such as stones, wool, animal bones, muscles, and the cremated ashes of animals, which were believed to have symbolic power (Hammons, 2008, p. 7).

As can be seen from the ritual examples mentioned above, wool of different colors was one of the most common objects in ancient Mesopotamian medical ritual practices. Thanks to the extensive trade network with Anatolia during the Assyrian trade colony period, many of these practices were transferred to the Hittites. In Hittite religious rituals, wool of various

colors was used in rituals. For Hittite society, wool had the properties of absorbing and cleansing impurities and evil in religious life.

In the Zarpiya ritual for epidemics, black, red, and yellow wool were wrapped together. In Tunnawi's ritual, men and women wrapped/plugged their ears with black wool. Blue and red wool were also used during the ritual (Turgut, 2018, p. 210). In Anniwiyanni's ritual, blue and red wool were wrapped around her feet, hands, throat, and the four legs of her bed: "and when it is dusk, first of all on the feet, hands, and throat of the ritual practitioner, and also on his bed, and the four feet are wrapped first of all with multicolored woolen cloth (standard blue wool)..." (Sturtevant, 1927, p. 7; Peled, 2010, p. 70).

In the ritual for a person who was depressed for religious reasons, white, blue, red, and black wool were cut into small pieces and thrown into the torch with straws. "... Then the man takes the white, blue, red and black(!?) balls of wool. And he removes small pieces from each of the balls. He throws them into [the torch] with straws..." (Beckman, 2007, p. 74). The throwing of pieces of wool into the torch was probably practiced for the purpose of the Mesopotamian Šurpu ritual.

Conclusion

As urbanism grew in southern Mesopotamia in the late 5th and 4th millennia BC, there were nomads there grazing goats and sheep. Wool became important in the area as a result, and the written record of the Old Assyrian Period, which roughly corresponded to the early Middle Bronze Age in archaeological terms and lasted from 1970 to 1715 BC, provides a wealth of information about the economic and social circumstances in the vast network of Assyrian trading settlements that were dispersed throughout modern-day Turkey. The 23,000 inscribed artifacts found at the site provide important proof of the Assyrians' extensive international trade in valuable textiles and tin. The three main commodities exchanged in this deal were copper, wool, and textiles made in the area. Ancient Mesopotamia was promoted as the land of wool, particularly in texts from the Old Babylonian period in the first half of the second millennium BC.

Although wool is largely mentioned in the record as a commercial commodity, its importance as a ritual object in daily life was striking. It was used for a variety of tasks, including the production of everyday items like clothing, blankets, and pillows. Along with serving these purposes, this object also had value as a ceremonial object. The use of wool in various colors, particularly in the healing rites of these ancient societies, is fascinating. One of the most prevalent items in ancient Mesopotamian medicinal ritual practices was wool of various colors, which was mentioned in therapeutic ritual literature. Religion, magic, and medicine were intertwined in ancient Mesopotamia.

Ritual activities and spells that were essential to the belief system can be considered acts in the realm of medicine. Varicolored wools were wrapped around the patient during some

rites, and in others, these wools were burned. Many of these customs were passed on to the Hittites because of the substantial commercial network with Anatolia that existed during the Assyrian trade colony period. Hittite religious rites utilized wool of various hues. Hittite society relied on wool to absorb and purify pollutants and evil in religious life.

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