

CONFERENCE PAPER

The Content and Significance of the Mesopotamian Cuneform Source *Sakikkû* in the Development of Medicine

Abstract

The *Sakikkû* (SA.GIG) series, a 40-tablet diagnostic handbook from ancient Mesopotamia (11th century BCE), represents a pivotal advancement in medical history. Compiled by scholar Esagil-kin-apli, it systematized symptom observation and prognosis. Organized into six groups, the text documented ~3,000 entries covering: environmental omens (Tablets 1–2); head-to-toe symptomatology (Tablets 3–14); and disease progression patterns (Tablets 15–25), including early contagion recognition. Later tablets detailed neurology (epilepsy), divine causation theories, and obstetrics (fetal development). While maintaining spiritual elements, *Sakikkû* prioritized empirical methods, anatomical precision, temporal tracking, and prognostic correlations, thereby establishing foundational diagnostic principles that influenced later medical traditions. This study was conducted to highlight the importance of *sakikkû* in Mesopotamian medicine.

Key words: Prognosis, Mesopotamia, History of Medicine

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Introduction

The *Sakikkû* (SA.GIG) series represents one of the most remarkable intellectual achievements of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization. This comprehensive diagnostic handbook, consisting of 40 meticulously organized cuneiform tablets, was systematically compiled and revised by the renowned scholar *Esagil-kin-apli* during the reign of King *Adad-apla-iddina* (1068-1047 BCE) (Heeßel, 2004, p. 100) (Figure 1).

The historical context of *Sakikkû*'s compilation reveals much about the development of medical thought in Mesopotamia. During the Middle Assyrian period when *Esagil-kin-apli* worked, there was a growing trend toward systematization of scholarly knowledge across various disciplines. This period witnessed the organization of omen collections, legal codes, and medical texts into more coherent structures, reflecting an emerging scientific mentality that sought to categorize and make sense of natural phenomena. The *Sakikkû* texts should be understood as part of this broader intellectual movement that characterized the first millennium BCE in Mesopotamia (Scurlock, and Andersen, 2005, p. 7). The aim of this study is to provide information about the importance and place of *sakikku* texts in Mesopotamian medicine and medical history.



Figure 1. Image of a tablet with cuneiform writing (TDP, pl. 31, A 3442 artifact entry, 2024).

Materials and Methods

A review of the current literature on Mesopotamian medicine was conducted. Theses and sources on this subject were accessed. In the course of the source review, search engines such as *yöktez* (<https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>), ResearchGate, and Google Scholar were utilized.

Results

Structure and Content

The *Sakikkû* series contains approximately 3,000 diagnostic entries organized into six distinct groups that demonstrate an extraordinarily sophisticated understanding of human anatomy and pathology for its time (Heeßel, 2004, pp. 100-101). The sheer volume of medical observations recorded in these tablets suggests they represent the culmination of centuries of accumulated medical knowledge, likely drawing from earlier Sumerian traditions that were translated and adapted into Akkadian. What makes the organization particularly impressive is its combination of anatomical precision with temporal progression of diseases, creating a multidimensional diagnostic framework.



1- Group 1 (Tablets 1-2): Preliminary Observations

The first two tablets document the āšipu's (healer-priest) observations made while traveling to the patient's residence. These omens, which might include encounters with certain animals, atmospheric phenomena, or even dreams, were believed to provide crucial diagnostic clues about the patient's condition. This practice shows the close connection between medical diagnosis and divinatory traditions in Mesopotamian thought.

2- Group 2 (Tablets 3-14): Systematic Symptomatology

Tablets 3 through 14 present a remarkably detailed head-to-toe survey of physical symptoms (Erdem, 2020, pp. 202-211). The tablets demonstrate particular sophistication in their description of cranial symptoms, including:

- Tablet 3: Headaches and fever patterns
- Tablet 4: Pain localization in temporal regions
- Tablets 5-7: Ocular, nasal, and oral pathologies

The later tablets in this group (10-14) document symptoms affecting the neck, torso, and extremities with similar precision, including descriptions of hand tremors, skin discolorations, and urinary abnormalities (Erdem, 2020, p. 210).

3- Group 3 (Tablets 15-25): Disease Progression

These tablets reveal an exceptionally advanced understanding of temporal disease patterns that anticipates modern concepts of disease staging. Tablet 18's correlation of fever patterns with specific symptoms like mental status changes and petechiae demonstrates keen clinical observation skills that went beyond superficial symptom recording (Scurlock, and Andersen, 2005, p. 45).

Tablet 22's description of disease clusters in households suggests an early recognition of contagious disease principles.

4- Groups 4-6: Specialized Knowledge

The remaining tablets cover three important specialized areas of medicine:

1. Epilepsy and neurological disorders (Tablets 26-30): These tablets document seizure types and associated symptoms with remarkable accuracy, even noting premonitory signs that modern medicine recognizes as auras (Diri, 2022, p. 13).
2. Divine causation of disease (Tablets 31-35): Tablet 33's detailed correlation of specific deities with particular ailments reveals the complex theological framework underlying Mesopotamian medicine.
3. Obstetrics and pediatrics (Tablets 36-40): Particularly noteworthy is Tablet 36's discussion of fetal gender prediction methods and Tablet 40's guidelines for neonatal care that include assessments of infant viability (Diri, 2022, p. 14).

Discussion

Diagnostic Methodology

The *Sakikkû* demonstrates a sophisticated diagnostic approach that emphasized:

1. Detailed symptom documentation
2. Pattern recognition in disease progression
3. Anatomical localization of pathologies

However, the almost exclusive focus of the text on diagnosis rather than treatment (Er-



dem, 2020, p. 199) suggests that the āšipu's primary role was prognostic rather than therapeutic.

Historical Significance

The *Sakikkû* represents a crucial milestone in medical history for several reasons:

1. Its systematic organization anticipated subsequent medical compendia;
2. Its empirical approach laid foundations for scientific medicine;
3. It preserved and systematized centuries of Mesopotamian medical observation.

Conclusion

As one of the earliest comprehensive medical texts, the *Sakikkû* series offers invaluable insights into the development of diagnostic medicine. The blend of empirical observation and theoretical framework in this text influenced subsequent medical traditions throughout the ancient world.

Authors' Contribution

Bülent Diri supervised the project, revised and reviewed the final draft of the manuscript. Robab Aalizadeh investigated and wrote the article. All authors read and approved the final version of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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