

**THE TERM *ĠBR* IN KTU 1.40
A POSSIBLE ARABIC-UGARITIC ISOGLOSS***

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1. The interpretation of the Ugaritic term *ġbr*, attested in the ritual tablet KTU 1.40, is a problematic one. In 1966 Gordon¹ suggested that the term might be considered as the proper name «Habiru», one of the people listed in the relevant context. This hypothesis, though queried by Van Selms², Weippert³, and Xella⁴, has been recently reaffirmed by de Moor and Sanders⁵ in a new and detailed study of KTU 1.40.

The interpretation of *ġbr*, however, remains very doubtful when recalling a most significant aspect, also pointed out by de Moor and Sanders. If, indeed, one accepts the identification of *ġbr* with the famous Habiru, it requires «a variant spelling of the name of Ḫapiru (normally *ḫprm* in Ugaritic)»⁶, whereas the alternance *ġ / ḫ* is unattested in Ugaritic⁷. In addition, the term *ġbr* does not have the *-y*, typical of the gentilics⁸. The argument is also supported by the fact that every gentilic (*Qṭy*, *Ddmy*, *Ḫry*, *Ḫty*, *Alty*) listed in the text is specifically marked by this ending within a sentence constructed as a rhymed strophe.

2. The question of the term *ġbr* turns out to be much more complicated because of the fact that no other attestations of it are available in the documentation from Ugarit. In such a case, a comparative approach to the use of the root may be helpful. Though the

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¹ C.H. Gordon, Review of A. Herdner's CTA, JNES 25, 1966, p. 64.

² A. Van Selms, CTA 32: A Prophetic Liturgy, UF 3, 1971, p. 235-48.

³ M. Weippert, Ein ugaritischer Beleg für das Land "Qadi" der ägyptischen Texten?, ZDPV 85, 1975, p. 147-55.

⁴ P. Xella, TRU, p. 265.

⁵ J.C. de Moor - P. Sanders, An Ugaritic Expiation Ritual and Its Old Testament Parallels, UF 23, 1991, p. 283-300. Most scholars concerned with the text under discussion have shared the present assumption, see e.g. J. Sapin, Quelques systèmes socio-politiques en Syrie au 2^e millénaire avant J.C., UF 15, 1983, p. 182; A. Caquot, in TOu II, p. 146. See also G. del Olmo Lete - J. Sanmartín, DLU I, p. 155.

⁶ De Moor - Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁷ It is possible that the alternation *ġ / ḫ* is also attested in certain personal names, see D. Sivan, A Grammar of the Ugaritic Language, Leiden / New York / Köln 1997, p. 27. See also J. Tropper, Ugaritische Grammatik, Münster 2000, *passim*.

⁸ D. Sivan, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

comparative survey does not offer much material suitable to the context of KTU 1.40⁹, it seems to me particularly significant to draw attention to an Arabic passage, contained in the collection of the *Mu‘allaqāt*, which may provide us with a possible clue to an alternative interpretation of Ugaritic *gbr*.

In the *qaṣīda* of *al-Ḥārīt*, 44-45, one may read the following passage:

44 *a‘alaynā gunāḥu Kindata an yağnama ġāziyhimi*
waminnā al-gazā’u

45 *am ‘alaynā garrā Ḥanīfata*
aw mā gama‘at min Muḥārib gabrā’u

44 «will the sin of Kindah be held against us if their raiders pillage?
shall we have to give satisfaction?

45 or will the guilt of the Ḥanīfah fall on us?
or what was collected by the robbers of the Muḥārib?»¹⁰.

As is clear from the context and from the parallel with the term *ġāzi* (aggressor, one who makes a raid) the term *ğabrā’u* is to be interpreted as «robbers, plunderers». Such a use of the root *gbr* is very rare in Arabic¹¹ where it usually means both «to go by, to pass» or «dust»¹².

⁹ It is most interesting to notice that the root under discussion appears to be attested only in South Semitic, and apparently nowhere else.

¹⁰ Syntactically, the passage *aw mā gama‘at min Muḥārib gabrā’u* is rather difficult, in respect of the present translation, as has recently been pointed out by P. Larchet (*La Mu‘allaqa de al-Ḥārīt b. Ḥilliza: essai de traduction ‘variantiste’*, AMEL 3/2, 2000); the scholar is probably right in assuming that the term *muḥārib* is to be taken as (p. 144): «un nom commun plutôt que comme un nom propre de tribu», his rendering is, however, not completely clear (p. 139): «(va-t-on nous imputer les crimes de Hanīfa.) / les va-t-en guerre, par année de cendre ameutés?». Apparently, the term *ğabrā’u* is not viewed as meaning «robbers» but «cendre» (?). A most reasonable interpretation of this passage is by Th. Nöldeke «oder was eine staubbedeckte (Schar) von den Muḥārib zusammengebracht hat» (Th. Nöldeke, *Fünf Mo‘allaqāt übersetzt und erklärt von Th. Nöldeke I. Die Mo‘allaqāt des ‘amr und des Ḥārith*, 140. Bd. VII, Wien 1899, SBAWW, 62), followed by A.J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes. The First Chapter in Arabic Literature*, London 1957, p. 224 and D. Amaldi, *Tracce consunte come graffiti su pietre. Note sul lessico delle Mu‘allaqāt*, Napoli 1999, p. 132, partially by J. Berque, *Les dix grandes odes arabes de l’Anté-Islam*, Paris 1979, p. 92.

¹¹ At any rate the meaning «robber, thief» is confirmed by ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, V, p. 3206, Cairo 1981, where the expression *banū gabrā’u* is considered to mean «strangers, peoples of low condition, poor and miserable peoples» and particularly *al-ṣa‘ālik* «robbers, brigants», «poets-brigants» (of the pre-Islamic period); the same expression *banū gabrā’u* is also mentioned by R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, Leiden / Paris 1967, p. 200, based on another source, Kāmil 709, 1, 710, 1, which explains the expression with *al-luṣūṣ*.

¹² The noun *ğubār*, normally meaning «dust», may also have a negative connotation. Of particular interest is the use of the noun *ğabarah* in the *Quran* 80, 40 where it is said that those who shall have the face covered with dust (*ğabarah* - *qatarah*) are to be considered as unbelievers and liars (*kaḥarah* - *fağarah*). One could propose an etymological connection between the negative sense of the term usually indicating the dust and the people acting as robbers. Such a semantic development might be echoed by epigraphic South Arabian, especially the usage in the Qatabanic dialect, where the root *gbr*, attested in the inscriptions Ḥuwaydar 1, 6, Ḥuwaydar 2, 8 and RÉS 3879,3 is to be rendered

A closer look at the Ugaritic passage in question, shows that this meaning in Arabic seems to fit the context perfectly. Particularly striking here is the following comment made by de Moor and Sanders: «In any case the Ḫapiru were feared as robbers which would explain their presence in the list close to the *ḫbtm*»¹³. In fact, the suggestion based on Arabic indicates that the *gbr* mentioned in the text does not refer to people notorious for being robbers (i. e., the Habiru), but instead is a rare and special term indicating the robbers themselves. The latter would be in parallel with the synonym-*ḫbt*, with the same meaning, with a clearer root in Akkadian (*ḫabātu*, «to spoil, to rob») than in Ugaritic. On the basis of the present parallel, therefore, one may conclude that the most reasonable candidate for interpreting Ugaritic *gbr* would seem to be «robber», and the usual translation «Habiru» should be rejected.

If this hypothesis is considered as plausible, one may suggest the present comparison as an Arabic-Ugaritic isogloss to be added to those collected by F. Renfroe in his important study of the topic¹⁴.

most probably as «servants, vassals». On the other hand, in the Sabaic and Minaic dialects the term has been rightly interpreted as «settlers on land» (as to Sabaic cf. A.F.L. Beeston, *Sabaeen Marginalia*, AION 34, 1974, p. 421; as to Minaic a good example is Shaqab al-Manaṣṣa 1, 7-8, discussed by Ch. Robin, *L'Arabie antique de Karib'il à Mahomet*, Aix-en-Provence 1991, p. 72), a rendering going back to the main Arabic use of *gbr* (what is composed of dust referring to ground and earth). Note the expression in the Yemeni dialect reported by M. Piamenta, *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic*, Leiden - New York - København - Köln 1990, p. 351: *ʿayṣāfi gabrā* «my life is misery».

¹³ De Moor - Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

¹⁴ F. Renfroe, *Arabic-Ugaritic Lexical Studies*, Münster 1992. Some interesting suggestions may also be found in J.F. Healey, *Ugaritic and Arabic*, in M. Dietrich - O. Loretz (eds.), *Ugarit. Ein Ostmediterranes Kulturzentrum im Alten Orient. Bd. I. Ugarit und seine altorientalische Umwelt*, Münster 1995.