

The Mountain in Labour: A Possible Graeco-Anatolian Myth

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P*arturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* (“Mountains will be in labour, they will give birth to a ridiculous mouse”). Horace’s comment in *Ars Poetica* 139 on an epic poet who begins his work with such a grandiose prelude that the narrative is bound to become an anticlimax is our earliest literary attestation of the well-known Graeco-Roman image of the ‘mountain that gives birth to a mouse’,¹ which is generally applied to a situation where the result does not match the expectations raised. A few decades after Horace, Phaedrus cast this into a fable of four iambic senarii (4.24):

*Mons parturibat, gemitus immanes ciens,
eratque in terris maxima expectatio.
At ille murem peperit. †hoc scriptum tibi,
qui magna cum minaris, extricas nihil.*

A mountain was in labour, sending forth dreadful groans,
and there was on earth the greatest expectation.

But it gave birth to a mouse. This is written for you,
who promise great things, but produce nothing.

This fable developed a rich afterlife in late antiquity, the middle ages, and the early modern period. However, the purpose of this article is to delve deeper into the literary and

¹ The plural *montes* is unique to Horace and probably determined by the metre, while the future tenses *parturient* (v.l. *parturiunt*) ... *nascetur* follow from the context, especially the immediately preceding 138 *quid dignum tanto feret hic promissor hiatus?* Cf. C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry. The ‘Ars Poetica’* (Cambridge 1971) 214–215.

mythological prehistory of the narrative and the proverb about ‘the mountain and the mouse’.

Scholarship here has so far been restricted to Greek sources, which allow us, with some probability, to trace at least the proverb to the middle of the fourth century B.C. The fable too is likely to be older than Phaedrus (if not, as is often assumed, Aesopic) and probably forms the basis of the proverb. Yet building on a brief comment by the Hittitologist Volkert Haas, I believe that one can go further and see in the ‘mountain that gives birth to a mouse’ a humoristic reflection of the ancient Anatolian motif of the mountain in labour.² This otherwise very rare concept plays a prominent role in the Hurro-Hittite Kumarbi Cycle, which shows numerous parallels with the succession myth in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. If this proposal about the ultimate origin of ‘the mountain and the mouse’ is correct, we can reconstruct the narrative skeleton of a completely new part of the Greek succession myth.

1. *Of mice and mountains in Greek*

Lucian in his satirical essay Πῶς δεῖ ἱστορίαν συγγράφειν (*How to Write History*) uses the proverb in a context that is similar to Horace’s (23):

καὶ μὴν καὶ ἄλλους ἴδοις ἂν τὰ μὲν προοίμια λαμπρὰ καὶ τραγικὰ καὶ εἰς ὑπερβολὴν μακρὰ συγγράφοντας, ὡς ἐλπίσαι θαυμαστὰ ἤλικα τὰ μετὰ ταῦτα πάντως ἀκούσεσθαι, τὸ σῶμα δὲ αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς ἱστορίας μικρὸν τι καὶ ἀγεννὲς ἐπαγαγόντας ... εὐθὺς γοῦν οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐπιφθέγονται αὐτοῖς τὸ “ὄδινεν ὄρος.”

Again, you may see others writing introductions that are brilliant, dramatic, and excessively long, so that you expect what follows to be marvellous to hear, but for the body of their history they bring on something tiny and undistinguished ... The audi-

² V. Haas, *Hethitische Berggötter und hurritische Steindämonen: Riten, Kulte und Mythen* (Mainz 1982) 161–162, and *Die hethitische Literatur* (Berlin 2006) 130, 153, 159–160.

ence there and then are calling out to them “a mountain was in labour.” (transl. K. Kilburn)

The fact that Lucian quotes only the first half of the proverb shows that he could assume his readers to be familiar with it. This is further underlined by the substantivising article, equivalent to the sense ‘the well-known maxim’.

There is indeed an earlier Greek attestation of the proverb. Plutarch in his *Life of Agesilaos* (36) tells the story of how towards the middle of the fourth century B.C. the octogenarian Spartan king offered military support to the Egyptian king Tachos in a revolt against the Persians. But when he arrived in Egypt and the Egyptians saw a tiny old man in unprepossessing attire, they laughed and joked that “here was an example of the old story ‘a mountain was in labour, then it gave birth to a mouse’” (ὅτι τοῦτο ἦν τὸ μυθολογούμενον, “ὠδίνειν ὄρος, εἶτα μὲν ἀποτεκεῖν”).

In this form the saying found its way into late-antique and Byzantine collections of proverbs.³ Interestingly, however, Plutarch introduces his quotation with τὸ μυθολογούμενον. Since μυθολογέω means “to tell mythic tales” (LSJ s.v. I.1), not “to quote proverbs,” we have to assume that a Greek fable resembling that of Phaedrus was well known in the second half of the first century A.D.⁴ There is no evidence that Phaedrus himself had gained the required currency by then. He is perhaps mentioned by his near-contemporary Martial (3.20.5 *improbi iocos Phaedri*), but the first certain reference to his work is found in the dedication letter to the Emperor Theodosius which Avianus prefixed to his collection of fables: *Phaedrus etiam partem aliquam* (sc. *Aesopi fabularum*) *quinque in libellos resolvit* (p.1.13–14 Ellis). Moreover, given that many of Phaedrus’ classic animal

³ CPG I 320 (Diogenianus), 378 (Gregory of Cyprus), II 733 (Michael Apostoles).

⁴ Cf. F. R. Adrados and G.-J. van Dijk, *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable* III (Leiden 2003) 515.

fables go back to the *Corpus Aesopicum*, a Greek source for the tale of the ‘mountain that gives birth to a mouse’ is very likely.

Further hints to the origin and date of this fable can be gleaned from Athenaeus, who offers a shorter version of the story about Agesilaos II (616D):

καὶ Ταχῶς δ’ ὁ Αἰγυπτίων βασιλεὺς Ἀγησίλαον σκώψας τὸν Λακεδαιμονίων βασιλέα, ὅτ’ ἦλθεν αὐτῷ συμμαχήσων, ἦν γὰρ βραχὺς τὸ σῶμα, ἰδιώτης ἐγένετο, ἀποστάντος ἐκείνου τῆς συμμαχίας, τὸ δὲ σκῶμμα τοῦτ’ ἦν·

ὠδινεν ὄρος, Ζεὺς δ’ ἐφοβεῖτο, τὸ δ’ ἔτεκεν μῦν.

ὅπερ ἀκούσας ὁ Ἀγησίλαος καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ἔφη “φανήσομαι σοὶ ποτε καὶ λέων.” ὕστερον γὰρ ἀφισταμένων τῶν Αἰγυπτίων, ὡς φησι Θεόπομπος καὶ Λυκέας ὁ Ναυκρατίτης ἐν τοῖς Αἰγυπτιακοῖς, οὐδὲν αὐτῷ συμπράξας ἐποίησεν ἐκπεσόντα τῆς ἀρχῆς φυγεῖν εἰς Πέρσας.

So when the Egyptian king Tachos mocked Agesilaos, the king of Sparta, when Agesilaos visited him in the hope of forming an alliance, because Agesilaos was not very tall, he was reduced to a private citizen when Agesilaos abandoned the alliance. The mocking remark was as follows:

A mountain was in labour, and Zeus was terrified; but it gave birth to a mouse.

When Agesilaos heard this, he became angry and said: “Some-day I’ll look like a lion to you!”; for later on, when the Egyptians revolted, according to Theopompus and Lyceas of Naucratis in his *History of Egypt*, he refused to cooperate with Tachos, and deposed him and drove him into exile in Persia. (transl. S. D. Olson, adapted)

Athenaeus is instructive in two ways. First, he quotes our proverb in an extended form, which tells us that Zeus was frightened by the sight of the mountain in labour. Second, Athenaeus adduces the fourth-century-B.C. historian Theopompus.⁵ This suggests that the episode of Agesilaos and

⁵ *FGrHist* 115 F 108. His other source, Lyceas of Naucratis (*FGrHist* 613 F 2) cannot be dated securely.

Tachos is historical. Whether the same applies to the reaction of the Egyptians to Agesilaos' unremarkable appearance, never mind their mockery, is another question. But it is possible that Athenaeus also found the proverb of the 'mountain in labour' in at least one of the authors he names. His version differs from all others by the addition of Zeus' fear and from that of Plutarch by the fact that it is in verse. The metre is the highly variable sotadean, which became popular as a stichic verse in Hellenistic times and is named after the third-century-B.C. poet Sotades, who indulged in it.⁶ If our line was taken from Theopompus, it would indeed be the earliest extant example (= *Coll. Alex.* 244.22). But even if Athenaeus took it from a later source, it would very probably be older than the simple prose version of Plutarch.

To sum up: with some reservation it is possible to trace the proverb of the 'mountain that gives birth to mouse' to the fourth century B.C. The fable is likely to be even older. But what about Zeus' fear in the verse quoted by Athenaeus? This motif could simply have been invented by the author of the sotadean with the intention of emphasising further the opposition between the prodigious announcement and the tiny result. But it is equally possible that we have here an important clue to the literary and mythological prehistory of the fable and proverb. To investigate this further we have to go back another two millennia—to ancient Anatolia.

2. *The 'mountain in labour' in Hurro-Hittite myth*

Extensive finds of clay tablets and the decipherment of the Hittite cuneiform script in the early twentieth century have introduced us to (and continue to increase our knowledge of) the religion and mythology of the Hittites, who from the eighteenth to the early twelfth century B.C. ruled over much of central Anatolia, down to the area of Ugarit on the north-

⁶ The rhythm is based on the ionic *a maiore* (— — ∪ ∪). For the scheme see M. L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford 1982) 144.

Syrian coast. While the Hittites and their language were Indo-European, they adopted a large part of their cultic practices and myths from indigenous Anatolian and neighbouring peoples of non-Indo-European origin, such as the Hattians, the Hurrians, and the Babylonians. Numerous texts, therefore, are at least in part attested in more than one language or indeed on bilingual tablets.

The group of myths from Anatolia which has turned out to be the most important for the understanding of early Greek literature is the Hurro-Hittite Kumarbi Cycle.⁷ Its central theme is the competition between Kumarbi and the Storm-God (Hurrian Teššub, Hittite Tarḫunna) for the kingship in heaven. Kumarbi becomes ruler of the gods after his father Alalu is deposed by his rival Anu (Akkadian “Heaven”) and he himself has dethroned Anu. Kumarbi then loses the kingship to Anu’s son, the Storm-God. He subsequently seeks to overcome the Storm-God with the help of various monstrous antagonists he fathers, ultimately without success. The influence of the Kumarbi Cycle on Hesiod’s *Theogony* is unmistakable.

The sequence of the texts that have with varying confidence been attributed to the Kumarbi Cycle is still debated, but it is generally agreed that the “song” (Sumerogram SĪR) which recounts the divine succession myth comes first.⁸ Only fragments of the first tablet survive (CTH 344 = KUB 33.120++),⁹ but

⁷ Conveniently assembled and translated into English by H. A. Hoffner Jr., *Hittite Myths*² (Atlanta 1998) 40–65. For a literary analysis, with a German translation interspersed, see Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur* 130–176. All major Hittite texts quoted in this section have been edited and furnished with a German translation by E. Rieken et al., at https://www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de/txhet_myth/textindex.php?g=myth&x=x.

⁸ See Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*² 40–41; Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur* 130; A. Archi, “Orality, Direct Speech and the Kumarbi Cycle,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 36 (2009) 209–229, at 211; M. R. Bachvarova, “Survival of ‘Popular’ Mythology: From Hittite Mountain Man to Phrygian Mountain Mother,” in S. Blakely et al. (eds.), *Religious Convergence in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Atlanta 2019) 203–229, at 205.

⁹ For the convenience of non-specialists I quote all Hittite texts not from

thanks to a recently identified new fragment (KBo 52.10), which completed the colophon, we now know the original title of the composition: “Song of Going Out” or “Song of Birth” (ŠĪR GÁxĒ.A).¹⁰ This probably refers to the theme of ‘giving birth’, especially the unnatural birth by a male parent.¹¹ The latter is a recurring motif not only in the “Song of Going Out,” but in the entire Kumarbi Cycle, if we do not treat the poems as an exception to the rule that for the Hittites deified mountains (not to be confused with mountain deities) and living rock were male. When these entities give birth, therefore, they engage in an activity diametrically opposed to their assigned gender.¹² The implications of this for the interpretation of the

their (main) tablet, but from the integrated editions of E. Rieken et al.; under “Introductio” the editors provide up-to-date lists of the relevant fragments.

¹⁰ See C. Corti, “The So-called ‘Theogony’ or ‘Kingship in Heaven’: The Name of the Song,” *SMEA* 49 (2007) 109–121 (where KBo 52.10 was still unpublished and designated as fragment 1194/u). The combined cuneiform sign which Corti transcribed as GÁxĒ.A (“going out”) is so far attested only there.

¹¹ G. Beckman, “Primordial Obstetrics,” in M. Hutter et al. (eds.), *Hethitische Literatur. Überlieferungsprozesse, Textstrukturen, Ausdrucksformen und Nachwirken* (Münster 2011) 25–33, at 28. J. Strauss Clay and A. Gilan, “The Hittite ‘Song of Emergence’ and the *Theogony*,” *Philologus* 158 (2014) 1–9, compare ἀνήμι/ἴημι (“bring forth, allow to emerge”) in Hes. *Theog.* 157, 495, and 669, where, respectively, Ouranos inhibits the birth of his children by Gaia, Kronos disgorges the offspring he has swallowed, and Zeus raises the Hundred-handers from Tartaros.

¹² See M. R. Bachvarova, “Towards an Understanding of the Gendered Hittite Landscape: What Does it Mean when Mountains give Birth?” in Y. Hazırlayan et al. (eds.), *Acts of the IXth International Congress of Hittitology* (Ankara 2019) 81–100. It is possible that the discrepancy between the male gender of mountains and the female act of giving birth is due to the non-Hittite origin of the myths. The Eastern Anatolian geography of the “Song of Going Out,” where Mt. Kanzura gives birth to the Storm-God’s brother Tašmišu (see below), favours the Hurrians as their creators or transmitters (cf. Haas, *Hethitische Berggötter* 142–148, who further supports the eastern origin of the ‘rock-child’ motif with its occurrence in the Caucasian Nart

Hurro-Hittite myths need not concern us here, but it is important to remember that we are dealing with a liminal process.

The main points of the “Song of Going Out” are quickly summarised: after Kumarbi has vanquished Anu, he bites off his genitals¹³ and is thus impregnated with the Storm-God, the river Aranzah (Tigris), and the god Tašmišu. But only the first two will be born through Kumarbi’s head. He spits out part of Anu’s seed on Mt. Kanzura, which receives it and eventually gives birth to Tašmišu (CTH 344 Ex. A Vs II 81–87):¹⁴

- 81 [... -m]a A-[NA^{HUR.SAG}kán-zu-ra
 82 [...] [ha-aš-ša-nu-e-r]a-an^{[HUR].SAG}kán-zu-ra-an
 83 [... -l]i²-[ya]-aš UR.SAG-iš ú-[et]
 84 [... a]-aš-[šu]-u-wa-za pe-e-da-az pa-ra-a [ú]-[et]
 85 [... -i]š-ki-[ú]-ta-ya^da-nu-uš
 86 [...]x ša-ku-iš-ke-ez-zi
 87 [... me-mi-iš]-[ki-u-an] [da-a-iš]

[...] to Mt. Kanzura [...] [They brought] him to birth, Mt. Kanzura. [...] the hero came [out], [...] he came out through the good place. [...] and Anu [...]ed. [...] observes [...] [... began to spe]ak.

This is our first example of a ‘mountain in labour’, though the result is not, as in the following two instances, a monstrous rival for the Storm-God, but a brother who will be on his side.

One of the creatures Kumarbi fathers to dethrone the Storm-God is the sea-snake Hedammu, whose mother is the giant daughter of the Sea-God. The story is told in the now very fragmentary “Song of Hedammu” (CTH 348). Hedammu is overcome by the goddess of love, Ištar (Hurrian Šauška,

sagas). Yet this is unlikely to have influenced the Hittites’ conceptualisation of mountains as male, which comes out clearly in a fragment in which Mt. Pišaiša attempts to have intercourse with the Anatolian Love-Goddess Anzili (CTH 350.3 = KUB 33.108).

¹³ Cf. the castration of Ouranos by Kronos in Hes. *Theog.* 154–210.

¹⁴ Text: Rieken et al.: CTH 344 (TX 2012-06-08); transl.: Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*² 44 (adapted).

Hittite Anzili), who stuns him with a love potion and subjects him to her feminine charms. The details are, unfortunately, not transmitted.

Another monster is the stone colossus Ullikummi. Here we see a variation on the ‘mountain in labour’ motif. In the “Song of Ullikummi” (CTH 345), the best-preserved portion of the Kumarbi Cycle, Kumarbi has intercourse with an enormous rock, which in due course gives birth to a stone child. The relevant passage reads (CTH 345.I.1 Ex. A Rs III 6–10):¹⁵

- 6 [NA₄²]-aš NA₄-an [na]-[...]
 7 na-an ḥa-aš-ša-nu-uš-[...] [...]
 8 NA₄pé-ru-na-aš ar-ḥa [...] [...]
 9 DUMU ḥku-mar-bi la-lu-u[k- ...]
 10 ḥa-aš-ša-nu-e-ra-an MUNUS^{MES} ...]

[...] the stone (nom.) the stone (acc.) [...] bring[- ...] it to birth [...] [...] the rock away [...] [...] son Kumarbi shin[e- ...] They brought it to birth, the women [...]

Because of the fragmentary nature of this passage and that about Mt. Kanzura it is impossible to draw extensive comparisons, but it seems clear that the labour is described in similar terms. Like human mothers-to-be, the mountain and the rock are assisted by “women” (MUNUS^{MES}) who “bring them to birth” (*ḥaššanu-*), that is, midwives. We will see below that this is not the only possible way to depict a ‘mountain in labour’.

Kumarbi recognises his new-born son, names him Ullikummi (“Destroyer of Kummiya,” the city of the Storm-God) and hides him from the other gods in the underworld. Ullikummi is planted on the right shoulder of the world-bearing giant Upelluri (an equivalent of the Greek Atlas), where he rapidly grows, eventually reaching from the bottom of the sea up to heaven. The Sun-God first notices the threat. He reports

¹⁵ Text: Rieken et al.: *CTH* 345.I.1 (TX 2009-08-31); transl: H. G. Güterbock, “The Song of Ullikummi: Revised Text of the Hittite Version of a Hurrian Myth,” *JCS* 5 (1951) 135–161, at 151–153 (adapted).

it to the Storm-God, who together with his brother Tašmišu goes to Mt. Ḫazzi in order to assess the situation. The reaction of the Storm-God is remarkable (CTH 345.I.2 Ex. A Vs I 24–34):¹⁶

- 24 *nu-kán LUGAL URUkum-mi-ya IGI^{HIA}-in ti-iš-ke-[ež]-zi*
 25 *nu-wa-kán IGI^{HIA}-in te-iš-ke-ež-zi :ša-pí-id-[du]-wa*
 26 *NA⁴ku-un-ku-nu-už-zi nu :ša-pí-id-du-wa-an NA⁴[ŠU].U-in*
 27 *a-uš-ta nu-uš-ši kar-tim-mi-ya-at-ti pe-ra-an x x*
 28 *[ta-me]-um-me-iš-ta*
 29 *[nu-za²] dU-aš da-ga-an e-ša-at nu-uš-ši-kán iš-ḫa-aḫ-ru*
 30 *[pa-ra]-a PA₅^{HIA}-uš ma-a-an ar-ša-an-zi nu dU-aš IGI^{HIA}-[wa]*
 31 *[iš-ḫ]a-aḫ-ru-wa-an-za me-mi-ya-an me-mi-iš-ke-ež-zi ku-iš-[w]a-ra-an*
 32 *[nam-m]a uš-ke-ež-zi u-ni-ya-an ḫal-lu-wa-in nu-wa ku-[iš] nam-ma*
 33 *[za-a]ḫ-ḫi-iš-ke-ež-zi nu-wa-ra-aš ku-iš nam-ma uš-ke-ež-zi*
 34 *[u-ni]-[ya]-aš na-aḫ-šar-ad-du-uš*

And the king of Kummiya set his face, he set his face upon the dreadful diorite. And he saw the dreadful diorite, and from anger his [...] became altered. The Storm-God sat down on the ground, and his tears flowed [for]th like streams. The Storm-God, his eyes [te]arful, spoke the word: “Who will [any long]er (endure to) see it, this hostility? Who will [fi]ght any longer? And who will any longer (endure to) see them, these terrors?”

The king of the gods is crying tears of fear and despair, as he does in the “Song of Hedammu,” after Ištar has told him about the sea monster (CTH 348.I.5 Ex. A 16–18). These are striking parallels for Zeus’ trepidation at the sight of the ‘mountain in labour’ in Athenaëus, and it may be that this is the mythological origin of this motif. As the Greek instantiation of the Indo-European Sky-God **dyeus*, Zeus is the direct equivalent of the Anatolian Teššub-Tarḫunna and would be the natural target of a mountain-born aggressor.

¹⁶ Text: Rieken et al.: *CTH 345.I.2* (TX 2012-06-08); transl: H. G. Güterbock, “The Song of Ullikummi: Revised Text of the Hittite Version of a Hurrian Myth (Continued),” *JCS* 6 (1952) 6–42, at 13 (adapted).

Ullikummi is in fact not as easy to subdue as Hedammu because he is deaf and blind and thus insensitive to Ištar's charms. He even prevails over the Storm-God for a while. Only when Tešsub-Tarḫunna, on the advice of Ea, reactivates the copper sickle with which heaven and earth were separated and (in a kind of symbolic castration) cuts Ullikummi off Upelluri's shoulder, the stone colossus loses his strength and is vanquished.

Another fragment, which has been attributed to the Kumarbi Cycle, describes the labour of Mt. Wāšitta from its own perspective, after it was impregnated, presumably by Kumarbi (CTH 346.5 Ex. A = KUB 33.118+):¹⁷

- 1 [...]x[...]
- 2 [...]x-x-[an] da-x[...]
- 3 [_ _]NÍ.TE-aš-ša-an m[u?- ...] [...]
- 4 [_ š]a-ak-ki ^dku-mar-bi-x[...]
- 5 [_ (_)]x-za-an UD^{KAM.HI.A.}uš kap-[pu-u-wa- ...]
- 6 [_ IT]U^{KAM.HI.A.}uš gul-aš-[ke-ez]-[zi] [...]
- 7 [k]e?-e-da-an-ta ^{GIŠ}BANŠUR x[...] [...]
- 8 [(_)]x-et nu-uš-ša-an [UD^{KAM.HI.A.}uš[...]
- 9 [_] 1^{KAM} pa-it ITU 2^[KAM] ti-ya-a[ē] [...]
- 10 [IT]U [5]^[KAM] ITU 6^[KAM] ITU 7 ITU 8^[KAM] ti-ya-a[ē] [...]
- 11 [tú]h-ḥe-eš-ki-u-[wa]-an ti-y[a-a]t
- 12 [^{HUR.SAG}wa_a-a-ši-it-ta-aš túh-ḥa-a-et [(_) t]úh-ḥi-ma-an x x x x[...]
- 13 [_ (_) -a]r ^dku-mar-bi-iš iš-ta-ma-[aš-t]a ^{HUR.SAG}[wa_a-a-ši-it]-[ta]
- 14 [tú]h-ḥa-a-et nu-uš-ši ^{HUR.SAG}MEŠ hu-[u]-ma-an-te-eš ú-w[a]-
[an?]-n[a]
- 15 [pa]-a-er ^{HUR.SAG}wa¹-a-a-ši-it-ta [^{HUR}].SAG^{MEŠ} hu-u-ma-an-te-eš
- 16 [me]-mi-iš-ki-u-wa-an da-a-er ^{HUR.SAG}wa-a-ši-it-[ta] [k]u-[wa]-[at-wa]
- 17 [tú]h-ḥa-a-et DUMU-an-na-za-wa-za túh-ḥi-ma-an Ú-UL ša-[ak-ti]
- 18 [Ú]-UL-an-ták-kán ^dgul-aš-še-eš gul-aš-še-er [Ú-UL]-ma-an-[tá]k-[kán]
- 19 [AM]A-aš še-er ḥa-aš-ta ^{HUR.SAG}wa-a-a-ši-it-[ta]-aš [da-pi-aš
^{HUR}].SAG^[MEŠ]

¹⁷ Text: Rieken et al.: CTH 346.5 (TX 2009-08-30).

Otten and Friedrich, who first transcribed and translated the fragment, understood *tuh̄hae-* as “to be in labour” and *tuh̄hima* as “pregnancy.”¹⁹ But this does not fit the use of *tuh̄hae-* and its cognates in other texts,²⁰ nor is the notion of pregnancy elsewhere expressed by the stem *tuh̄h-*.²¹ Friedrich himself therefore later followed Laroche, who on the basis of another enigmatic passage suggested “to gasp, to be short of breath” (and the respective nouns).²² This was widely accepted.²³ However, Kloekhorst recently argued persuasively that the stem *tuh̄h-* is to be connected with the Indo-European root **dhuH₂-* (“to smoke, smoke”), which also supplied e.g. Sanskrit *dhūmá-*, Greek θυμός, θύω, and Latin *fumus*. This meaning is not only satisfactory in

¹⁹ H. Otten, *Keilschriftkunden aus Boghazköi XXXIII* (Berlin 1943) iii; J. Friedrich, “Zum hethitischen Lexicon,” *JCS* 1 (1947) 275–306, at 293, and “Zu einigen kleinasiatischen Gottheiten,” *JKF* 2 (1952/3) 144–153, at 151–152.

²⁰ KBo 7.14 i + KUB 36.100 5–6 (cf. n.22 below), KUB 7.41 + 10, KBo 10.2 iii 40 ~ KBo 10.1 rev. 23–24 (Hittite *tuh̄huwai-* ~ Akkadian *qutra*, “smoke”), KUB 35.143 ii 10–11 // KUB 35.145 ii 2, KUB 17.15 ii 8–9 (Cuneiform Luvian *tuh̄hara-* in Hittite contexts that refer to burning).

²¹ Kloekhorst, in *Audias fabulas veteres* 168. Attested are the denominative verb *armae-* (“to be pregnant”), its adjective *armawant-* (“pregnant”), and the causative *armah̄h-* (“to make pregnant”). Their relationship to **arma-* (“moon(god), month”) is unclear (Kloekhorst, *Etymological Dictionary* 207).

²² E. Laroche, “Hittite *-ima-*: indo-européen *-mo-*,” *BSL* 52 (1956) 72–78, at 75. His index passage was KBo 7.14 i + KUB 36.100 5-6 ... *nu-u=t-ta har-ták-kán ma-a-an* | []*x-iš-ke-mi nu tu-uh̄-hi-ya-at-ti-it a-ak-ti* (“I will [...] you like a bear, | and you will perish of *tuh̄hiatt-*”). Laroche supplied “compress” for the first-person verb []*x-iškemi* (“*je te [serre?]rai*”), from which “suffocation” followed as the cause of death (*tuh̄hiattit*), but since only its ending survives, the argumentation is circular.

²³ E.g. Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur* 159; J. Tischler, *Hethitisches Handwörterbuch* (Innsbruck 2001) 178–179 (~ S. Vanséveren, *Vocabulaire hittite y compris Louvite, Palaïte, Akkadien et Sumérien* [Leuven 2016] 383); H. G. Güterbock et al. (eds.), *The Hittite Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago 1980–) s.vv. *pantala-*, *šak(k)-* 1.i.2.

the Wāšitta-fragment—the mountain is “smoking,” that is, volcanically active—but also in all other occurrences of *tuh̄hae-* and its cognates.²⁴

Despite Kloekhorst’s new etymology, it is evident that the Wāšitta-text describes a ‘mountain in labour’. The reference to sexual intercourse, presumably with Kumarbi (lines 30–31), and the formulaic counting of the months from one to ten do not allow another interpretation.²⁵ The only difference between the labour of Mt. Kanzura in the “Song of Going Out” and that of the Rock in the “Song of Ullikummi” is that the reaction of Mt. Wāšitta is described more naturalistically, in terms of vulcanism, which must have formed the real-life basis of the ‘mountain in labour’ motif.²⁶ Since the tablet is broken, we cannot tell to what creature the mountain is about to give birth, but if Kumarbi is the father, it is likely to have been another monstrous rival to the Storm-God.

²⁴ Kloekhorst, *Etymological Dictionary* 886–889 and in *Audias fabulas veteres* 165–176. Bachvarova, in *Acts of the IXth ... Congress* 89–94, maintains that *tuh̄hae-* also has an audible aspect and thus translates its use in the Wāšitta-fragment with “smoke and rumble.” Her main argument is that Kumarbi “heard” the mountain’s emission (CTH 346.5 Ex. A 12–13), which conforms to a narrative principle of Hurro-Hittite song that “hearing direct speech frequently occurs as a way of motivating a step forward in the action” (93). On the other hand, no such audible aspect is present at the other occurrences of *tuh̄hae-* and its cognates, and Kloekhorst, in *Audias fabulas veteres* 175, cites a passage where *ištamašš-* clearly means “hear about” (CTH 40.IV.1.A = KBo 5.6 iii 5–6). Still, Bachvarova’s interpretation is attractive, and it is possible that we simply have too few attestations of *tuh̄hae-* to assess its meaning fully.

²⁵ The Hittites followed a lunisolar calendar, according to which a regular pregnancy lasts ten months. For the ‘count-down’ cf. CTH 344 Ex. A Rs IV 13–16 (“Song of Going Out”).

²⁶ For Bachvarova, in *Acts of the IXth ... Congress* 90, vulcanism also provides the conceptual link between the male deified mountain and the female activity of giving birth because a volcanic eruption can be associated with both ejaculation and birth (of new rocks).

3. *Synthesis*

As mentioned above (424 with n.2), Volkert Haas was the first to point out the parallel between Horace's *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* and the ancient Anatolian concept of the 'mountain in labour', although he wrongly traced the Graeco-Roman fable back to Aesop and did not elaborate on the comparison. However, he perceptively described the classical tale of the 'mountain that gives birth to a mouse' as an unintentional parody of the Hurro-Hittite myth.²⁷

A parody requires an original which is being parodied. I therefore propose two possible explanations:

- (1) The Graeco-Roman fable and proverb are a humoristic version of a much older Greek myth, taken over from Asia Minor and probably located there.
- (2) The creator of the fable and/or the proverb had direct access to an Anatolian story about a mountain in labour and adapted it in a not entirely serious fashion.

The first scenario assumes an otherwise unattested component of the Greek succession myth as we know it from Hesiod's *Theogony*. The oriental provenance of the succession myth is beyond doubt, given its similarities to the Kumarbi Cycle and the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma eliš*²⁸ and the fact that most of its parts are located in the eastern Mediterranean. The same inference would have to be made about the 'mountain in labour', which, unlike 'Mother Earth' giving birth, is not a Greek concept.²⁹

²⁷ Haas, *Hethitische Berggötter* 161: "Dabei wird es ihm [i.e. Aesop] kaum bewußt gewesen sein, daß er da nicht nur ein Großmaul, sondern auch einen ehrwürdigen hethitischen Mythenstoff parodiert hat."

²⁸ See, briefly, M. L. West, *Hesiod. Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 20–24, and *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 1997) 278–283.

²⁹ While the Greeks associated mountains with gods and divine worship, they did not have deified mountains. See I. Rutherford, *Hittite Texts and Greek Religion. Contact, Interaction, and Comparison* (Oxford 2020) 187.

The story can be reconstructed thus: an older deity (Kronos?) has intercourse with a mountain, which in due course, and amidst great pain, gives birth to a savage antagonist to Zeus. Just as Mt. Wāšitta begins to smoke after being impregnated by Kumarbi, so the mountain in Phaedrus, which is about to give birth to a mouse, is “sending forth dreadful groans” (4.24.1 *gemitus immanes ciens*); and just as the threat of Hedammu and Ullikummi causes the Hurro-Hittite Storm-God to lose confidence for a moment (432 above), so Zeus may have looked upon the ‘mountain in labour’ with some trepidation. It is possible then that the author of the sotadean transmitted in Athenaeus 616D (ὄδινεν ὄρος, Ζεὺς δ’ ἐφοβέϊτο, τὸ δ’ ἔτεκεν μῦν) used this motif to emphasise the anticlimax in the shape of the emerging mouse.

The fact that there is no other evidence for such a narrative need not mean that it did not exist. Many mythological variants have left only traces or are transmitted in relatively late sources. One example is the battle between Zeus and Typhos, which is first extensively described in Hes. *Theog.* 820–880. The story-line has several Ancient Near Eastern parallels, but the Greek versions that are closest to the two known variants of the Anatolian myth of the Storm-God fighting the dragon Illuyanka (CTH 321) are attested only in Ps.-Apollodorus (1.6.3), Oppian (*Hal.* 3.15–25), and Nonnus (*Dion.* 1.140–320, 362–535, 2.1–712).³⁰

³⁰ Cf. C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon. Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford 1995) 448–459; R. Lane Fox, *Travelling Heroes. Greeks and their Myths in the Epic Age of Homer* (Oxford 2008) 295–318; D. Ogden, *Drakōn. Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford 2013) 12–13, 74–78; I. Rutherford, “Kingship in Heaven in Anatolia, Syria and Greece: Patterns of Convergence and Divergence,” in L. Audley-Miller et al. (eds.), *Wandering Myths: Transcultural Uses of Myth in the Ancient World* (Berlin 2018) 3–22, at 14–16, and *Hittite Texts* 150–153. It may be significant that Oppian came from Cilicia.

Postulating a hypothetical myth is a bold step. But otherwise we would still have to assume that the inventor of the fable and/or the proverb of the mountain and the mouse was familiar with a narrative like that of Wāšitta because the motif of the ‘mountain in labour’ is alien to Greek myth (cf. 437 above). This second scenario is not as unlikely as it seems. Following Timotheus the Eumolpid (ca. 300 B.C.), the late-third-century-A.D. Christian apologist Arnobius (*Adv.nat.* 5.5) recounts a myth from Central Anatolian Pessinus, the main location of the Phrygian Cybele cult in Graeco-Roman times: Jupiter, spurned by the Magna Mater, has intercourse with a rock called Agdus. After a difficult labour (*mugitibus editis multis*) the rock gives birth to an unusually strong and violent hermaphroditic child, Acdestis, who tries the gods’ patience to the point that they feel the need to curb him. Thus Liber contrives an elaborate trap, involving wine and a snare, with which the intoxicated Acdestis castrates himself. Arnobius continues to tell of the birth (from Acdestis’ semen) and unfortunate life of Cybele’s associate Attis, which must originally have been a separate story, providing an aetiology for the eunuch priests of Cybele (*galloi*).³¹ But the basic structure of Acdestis myth resembles the “Song of Ullikummi.” This shows not only that some Hurro-Hittite story-patterns persisted locally, most likely in oral form, long after the Bronze Age, but also that individual Greeks could hear of them.³²

³¹ W. Burkert, “Von Ullikummi zum Kaukasus: Die Felsgeburt des Unholds. Zur Kontinuität einer mündlichen Erzählung,” *Wüurzjbb* N.F. 5 (1979) 253–261, at 258; Bachvarova, in *Religious Convergence* 222.

³² On the parallels with the “Song of Ullikummi,” as well as Caucasian legends (cf. n.12 above), see Burkert, *Wüurzjbb* N.F. 5 (1979) 253–261, and Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur* 172–175 (with further literature). The use of a mood-altering drink against the enemy also recalls Ištar’s love potion in the “Song of Hedammu” (cf. 430–431 above; Bachvarova, in *Religious Convergence* 207). By contrast, Rutherford, *Hittite Texts* 172–173, 178, considers the shared motifs as not distinctive enough to posit an Anatolian origin for the

Perhaps, therefore, the fable/proverb of the ‘mountain that gives birth to a mouse’ goes back to such an encounter. It is even possible that some memory of the ‘mountain in labour’ originating in vulcanism survived until Horace’s time, who immediately after comparing his Cyclic poet to a mountain giving birth to a mouse (*Ars P.* 136–139), praises Homer for not intending to create smoke out of blazing light, but blazing light out of smoke (143–144 *non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem/cogitat*). Latin *fumus*, we recall, is cognate with Hittite *tuh̄hae-* and *tuh̄hima* in the story of Wāšitta (435–436 above), and *fulgor* refers to volcanic fire in Plin. *Ep.* 6.16.13.

Since to a Greek the concept of a ‘mountain in labour’ must have appeared ‘foreign’, if not perhaps downright bizarre (‘Mother Earth’ provided some analogue after all), the incentive to parody it for an audience equally unfamiliar with it must have been quite strong.³³ This applies whether or not we postulate a serious Greek version (as in the first scenario) to have

Acdestis myth. It has been suggested that the rock-birth of Mithras, the Indo-Iranian god of light whose cult flourished across the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries A.D., was inspired by a myth like that of Acdestis. However, the representations of Mithras’ genesis are too varied to go back to a single source. Most importantly, there was no canonical notion that he was fathered or born. Reliefs usually show him rising from a rock as a fully-grown youth, just as in the great Avestan *Hymn to Mithra* (*Yast* 10.4.13) he is the first of the gods to appear in all his golden splendour over the summit of Hara (modern Elburz). By contrast, the birth of Mithras’ own son Diorphos from a rock near the Armenian river Araxes and his metamorphosis into a mountain after he challenged Ares (Ps.-Plut. *De fluw.* 1165A–B) shows unmistakable influence from the Acdestis myth. See M. J. Vermaseren, “The Miraculous Birth of Mithras,” *Mnemosyne* SER. IV 4 (1951) 285–301, especially at 285–291.

³³ Cf. Bachvarova’s principle of comparative mythology, in *Acts of the IXth ... Congress* 88: “we should focus not only on what is shared, or unchanged when comparing myths separated by time, space, language, culture, but on how shared motifs were reworked or combined in different ways to present a message relevant or appealing to the storyteller’s particular audience.”

preceded the birth of the mouse. I discuss the likely date of the parody below.

But how did knowledge of Ancient Anatolian and Near Eastern myths reach the Greeks? There are many possible channels of transmission, private as well as official ones, some of which (like intercultural families or travel related to trade) could have operated at any time after the Greeks began to interact with Asia Minor and the Levant in the fourteenth century B.C.³⁴ However, recent research has especially focussed on ritual settings and ‘international’ festivals in the early Iron Age.³⁵ For the Kumarbi Cycle the area of Mt. Ḫazzi (modern Jebel al-Aqra) on the north-Syrian coast near the site of ancient Ugarit is of particular interest. Still known for its spectacular thunderstorms, the mountain was sacred to the Hurrians and Hittites, the Canaanites, and later the Greeks, who all regarded it as the seat of their respective Storm-God.³⁶ It is very probable that the Kumarbi Cycle was performed as part of the “Ritual for Mt. Ḫazzi” (CTH 785 = KBo 8.86, 8.88++), which stipulated the singing of the “Song of Kingship” and the “Song

³⁴ From about 1400 B.C. Hatti had regular (partly military) dealings with Ahḫiyawa (= Mycenaean Greece) in Western Anatolia, and Milawanda/Milawata (= Miletus) was under Ahḫiyawan occupation from ca. 1320 to 1220. There is also proof that in the thirteenth century Mycenaean merchants operated in the Levant. In a treaty between the Hittite king Tudhaliya IV (reigned 1237–1228) and his relative and vassal Šaušgamuwa of Amurru (south of Ugarit) the latter is forbidden to let any ship of Ahḫiyawa trade with Babylon: CTH 105 = G. Beckman et al., *The Ahḫiyawa Texts* (Atlanta 2011) no. 2 §15 (see Rutherford, *Hittite Texts* 154–156).

³⁵ See M. R. Bachvarova, *From Hittite to Homer. The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic* (Cambridge 2016).

³⁶ Hurro-Hittite Tešsub-Tarḫunna, Canaanite Baal Sapōn (after Šapānu, the Semitic name for the mountain), and Greek Zeus Kasios, whose cult is attested since Hellenistic times, but probably much older (Lane Fox, *Travelling Heroes* 260). The Greek name of the mountain, Kasios, may be an adaptation of the Hurro-Hittite Ḫazzi.

of the Sea.”³⁷ Conversely, Mt. Ḥazzi is mentioned as the Storm-God’s lookout in the “Song of Ullikummi” (CTH 345.I.2 Ex. A Vs I 22–27; cf. 432 above). If these rites continued into the Neo-Hittite kingdoms of northern Syria, the myths could have been passed on to the Greeks, whose permanent presence in the area is attested archaeologically from the late ninth century.³⁸

Alternatively, transmission could have occurred earlier, in the Late Bronze Age, as mentioned above (441 with n.34). Rutherford even suggest that Syrian predecessors of (parts of) the Kumarbi Cycle could have reached Crete via merchant routes from the eighteenth century B.C. onwards. But this hypothesis is currently impossible to underpin with solid evidence.³⁹

In any case, these myths were very probably transmitted orally rather than through textual sources. It is thus unsur-

³⁷ See Archi, *Altorientalische Forschungen* 36 (2009) 219–220; C. Corti, “From Mt. Ḥazzi to Šapinuwa. Cultural Traditions in Motion in the First Half of the 14th Century BC,” *Mesopotamia* 52 (2017) 3–20. The “Song of the Sea,” which is attested in a larger Hurrian and a few small Hittite fragments, may have described a battle between the Storm-God and the Sea, analogous to the Ugaritic myth about the conflict of Baal and the Sea-God Yamam (I. Rutherford, “The Song of the Sea (ŠA A.AB.BA SİR). Thoughts on KUB 45.63,” in G. Wilhelm (ed.), *Akten des IV. International Kongresses für Hethitologie* [Wiesbaden 2001] 598–609). A connection of the “Song of the Sea” with the Kumarbi Cycle was first proposed by Ph. H. W. Houwink ten Cate, “The Hittite Storm God,” in D. J. W. Meijer (ed.), *Natural Phenomena. Their Meaning, Depiction and Description in the Ancient Near East* (Amsterdam 1992) 83–148, at 117 (cf. Rutherford, *Hittite Texts* 148).

³⁸ E.g. Lane Fox, *Travelling Heroes* 255–272 and “Introduction: Travelling Myths, Travelling Heroes,” in *Wandering Myths* XXXIII–LIV; Strauss Clay and Gilan, *Philologus* 158 (2014) 6–7; Rutherford, *Hittite Texts* 154.

³⁹ Rutherford, *Hittite Texts* 156–158, and “Borrowing, Dialogue and Rejection: Intertextual Interfaces in the Late Bronze Age,” in A. Kelly et al. (eds.), *Gods and Mortals in Early Greek and Near Eastern Mythology* (Cambridge 2021) 201–214, at 204–206, 208–211.

prising that the correspondences are not as precise as in the case of the purely literary intertextuality that we are used to on the Graeco-Roman side. If therefore two or more different motifs, such as the fear of the Storm-God and the ‘mountain in labour’, appear in different texts, it remains possible that in another version of the myth they belonged together. Moreover, we must not forget the extremely fragmentary nature of the Hittite and Greek history of transmission.

Finally, the mouse: since it is unlikely that the fable and the proverb of ‘the mountain that gives birth to a mouse’ themselves originated in Anatolia,⁴⁰ the creature must have been invented by the Greek parodist of the myth. Mice regularly appear in the Aesopic animal fable, often as emblems of the small, (apparently) weak, and harmless, especially in opposition to larger and stronger animals. When Athenaeus, or his source, has Agesilaos reply to Tachos’ mockery “Someday I’ll look like a lion to you!” this alludes to the symbolic contrast between the two animals. One recalls the fable of the lion and the mouse, in which a lion spares the life of an obnoxious mouse, who later rescues him from a deadly trap (Babr. 107 = Perry 150).

As noted above (426–427), the proverb of the mountain and the mouse may already have been associated with Tachos in contemporary Greek sources, that is, in the middle of the fourth century B.C. If we assume the narrative version to be slightly older, we arrive at precisely the heyday of mythical

⁴⁰ No animal fables of the Aesopic type, which have Sumero-Babylonian precedents (see West, *East Face of Helicon* 319–320, 502–506), are so far attested from ancient Anatolia. A collection of Hurro-Hittite wisdom parables (KBo 32.12, 14), in which animals or man-made objects are cursed and destroyed for rebelling against their benefactors, comes closest to the genre. But the stories are much simpler, and while the protagonists (including a mountain!) talk and display human emotions, they do not otherwise deviate from their usual behaviour. And since the moral is not necessarily clear from the ‘fable’, the narrator subsequently explains the analogy to the human world.

burlesque in Old and Middle Comedy as the period in which it could have come into being. A fifth-century parallel for an animal fable inspiring mythical parody is Trygaeus' journey to Olympus by means of a giant dung-beetle at the beginning of Aristophanes' *Peace* (1–179). In this scene, which parodies Bellerophon's attempt to fly up to the gods on Pegasus (especially as represented in Euripides' *Bellerophon*), the insect is taken from the Aesopic fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle (*Pax* 127–134).⁴¹ In Hellenistic times the mock-Homeric epics *Galeomyomachia* (*The Battle of the Weasel and Mice* = P.Mich.inv. 6946) and *Batrachomyomachia* (*The Battle of the Frogs and Mice*) were based on fables or folktales featuring said animals,⁴² but these are genre-parodies rather than mythical travesties. What distinguishes 'the mountain that gives birth to a mouse' from these examples

⁴¹ In the fable (Perry 3), which is transmitted in slightly differing versions, an eagle destroys the offspring of a dung-beetle or eats a hare that was under its protection. In revenge the dung-beetle keeps breaking the eagle's eggs until the bird flees to Zeus and lays its eggs in the god's lap. But the beetle makes its way to Olympus and tricks Zeus into leaping up so that the eagle's eggs fall down and break again. The moral is that closeness to the gods does not protect the strong and wicked, but Aristophanes in *Peace* merely uses the dung-beetle as a comic replacement for Pegasus. See S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes. Peace* (Oxford 1998) xxxiv–xxxv, and E. Avdoulou, "Comic *Kantharoi*: The Fable of the Eagle and the Dung-Beetle in Aristophanes," in A. Fries et al. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Comedy. Genre – Texts – Reception. Essays in Honour of Angus M. Bowie* (Berlin 2020) 121–131, esp. 126–129.

⁴² H. S. Schibli, "Fragments of a Weasel and Mouse War," *ZPE* 53 (1983) 1–25; M. Hosty, *Batrachomyomachia (Battle of the Frogs and Mice)* (Oxford 2019) 21–32. Plutarch in his *Life of Agesilaos* (15.4) ascribes to Alexander the Great a mocking comparison between his great campaign in Persia and Antipater's "mouse-war" (μυομαχία) with Agis in Arcadia. Whether or not this alludes to the *Batrachomyomachia*, which need not mean that Alexander already knew the poem (Hosty 6), it is interesting that Plutarch speaks of a "mouse-war" in the same work in which Agesilaos II is compared to a mouse for not corresponding to the popular image of a famed general.

is that the parody itself became a fable, acquiring a moral that was absent in the original.

To sum up: I hope to have further elucidated Horace's well-known verse and its parallels and to have shown that linguistic and literary comparisons with other ancient cultures still have much to offer to Greek and Latin studies.⁴³

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