

The Casting of Lots among the Hittites in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

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The casting of lots, for a wide range of purposes, was a common practice among the different cultures of the ancient Near East (ANE). The division of land, the election of officials, the working order of priests, choosing a sacrificial animal—in these, as well as in other instances in which a choosing process had to take place, the result was often determined by the casting of lots. This was done not in the sphere of human practice alone, for even the gods are apt to reach a decision by the casting of lots. The common goal of all of these practices seems to have been to reveal some inherent, hidden truth, perhaps even a cosmic one. The casting of lots does not lead to an arbitrary decision, and the result is not an indication of pure chance. It reveals the fate of individuals as determined by forces stronger than the gods themselves. In the Babylonian story of the flood, *Atra-Ḫasis*, tablet I, lines 11–12,¹ the gods cast lots in order to divide the universe among themselves. Anu, the senior among them, receives the rule of heaven, an indication that the result of the process is not purely arbitrary.

The casting of lots by both human-beings and gods can also be found in the Hittite material. In the Illuyanka myth (CTH 321) the gods use lots in order to determine their hierarchy. The result of the process is that the god Zaliyanu and his family assume a higher position than the Storm-god of Nerik, one of the important gods in the Hittite pantheon.² In this text a conversation takes place between a GUDU-priest named Taḫpurili, also known from other texts to be a priest in the town of Kaštama,³ and the gods who intend to meet the Storm-god of Nerik. Prior to the conversation, the text indicates the greatness of the god Zaliyanu as follows:⁴

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1. W. G. Lambert & A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḫasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (repr.: Winona Lake, Ind., 1999), 43.

2. Gary Beckman, “The Anatolian Myth of Illuyanka,” *JANES* 14 (1982), 11–25. See also Galina Kellerman, “Towards the Further Interpretation of the *purulli*-festival,” *Slavica Hierosolymitana* (1981), 35–46.

3. KBo. 25.9 i,6 KBo. 16.81, 73. See Kellerman, “Further Interpretation,” 42, n. 7, and also F. Pecchioli Daddi & A. M. Polvani, *La mitologia ittita* (Brescia, 1990), 53, n. 23.

4. Following the translation by Beckman, “Anatolian Myth,” 16; CTH 321 Div 1’–7’. Harry A. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths* (Atlanta, 1990), 13, translates differently, indicating Zašḫapuna as the male deity. The text is ambiguous, but I prefer Beckman’s reading on this point. Pecchioli Daddi & Polvani, *La mitologia ittita* (1990), 53, translate like Beckman.

To the GUDU-priest they made the first gods the last, and the last they made the first gods. The god Zaliyanu's cultic share is great. Zaliyanu's wife—Zašḫapuna—is greater than the Storm-god of Nerik.⁵

After this statement, the following conversation ensues:⁶

8' Thus said the gods to the GUDU-priest *taḫpurili*:
9' "When we go to the Storm-god of Nerik
10' Where shall we sit down?"

11' Thus said the GUDU-priest *taḫpurili*:
12' "When you (pl.) sit down on a diorite throne
13' [and] when they deposit the lot for themselves (with) the GUDU-priest—
14' The GUDU-priest who holds the deity Zaliyanu—
15' a diorite throne will be situated above the spring/water—
16' and there he shall be seated."

14'Aiv "All the gods will arrive
15' and deposit the lot for themselves. Of all
16' the gods of the town Kaštama
17' Zašḫapuna will be the greatest

18' Because she (is) the wife of the deity Zaliyanu
19' (and) the deity Tazzuwaši (is) his concubine
20' these three persons (=gods) will remain
21' in the town of Tanipiya."

The text then adds an administrative passage indicating royal allocation of a field with a garden, a threshing-floor and buildings, all, apparently, for a temple to the god Zaliyanu and his family.⁷

The setting of the text is a cultic one, where the deities' statues are apparently held by priests over a holy spring. The GUDU-priest *Taḫpurili* utters a kind of "prophecy" which foretells the result of the casting of lots. The lot procedure is attached to an oracular communication, where the priest receives the answer regarding the greatness of Zašḫapuna, announces it, and as a result, immediately thereafter comes the decree from the palace regarding the erection of the temple.

The Hittite word for "lot," which is *pul-*, has been attested to in the lexical list KBo. 26.20 iii, 23–24 in parallelism with the Sumerian *GIŠ.ŠUB.BA* and the Akkadian *is-si-qú* = *isqu*.⁸ In spite of the fact that the Akkadian language has the word *pūru* to indicate lot, this lexical text mentions only *isqu*, which is in fact the standard

5. The deity *Zaliyanu* is also written *Zalinu*; see B. H. L. van Gessel, *Onomasticon of the Hittite Pantheon* (Leiden, 1998), 571–52.

6. The translation follows the translation of Beckman, "Anatolian Myth."

7. Kellerman, "Further Interpretation," 36–37, tried to give this text an historical context for the revival of the cult in the city Kaštama under the reign of Ḫattušili III and his son Tudḫalia IV. Since the current article deals with the practice of casting lots, this issue will not be treated here. For our concern, the main point is that the text declares a royal edict for the establishment of a temple in Tanipiya.

8. This text joins KBo. 1.44 + KBo. 13.1 as indicated by the editors in the introduction to KBo. 26. See also *CHD* P/3, 373.

Akkadian term.⁹ Checking the attestations of the Akkadian *pūru* shows that this word appears mainly in Assyrian texts, at Nuzi, at Emar, and in NB texts.¹⁰ One may say that the word *isqu* belongs to standard Akkadian, whereas the word *pūru* was more of a peripheral word. The word *pul-* for “lot” may have been received in Hittite from the Hurrians, together with many other cultic practices.¹¹ Whether or not the Akkadian *pūru* was the origin of the Hurrian *pul-* cannot yet be proven.¹²

In his translation of the text regarding the god Zaliyanu and his family, Beckman translates the words “*pūl tianzi-*”—which appear twice in the text—as “they cast or will cast the lot.”¹³ However, the verb “*dai-tiya*” may be more literally translated “to put, to place” rather than “cast”. Each god places or deposits his own lot for himself with the GUDU-priest.¹⁴

The actual process of handling the lots is not described in this text, except for the fact that the gods are seated together. However, a partial description of the process can be found in another text, KUB 17.35. This text is a cult inventory, which includes a description of a festival called EZEN *pulaš*, meaning: “festival of the lot.” The text describes the election and inauguration of a priest.¹⁵

As often is the case, the text is broken and has to be amended. I read the text as follows: “[When to the Storm-god the festival of the lo]t they celebrate, they wash; the SANGA-priest washes himself (and) he washes the god. [The priests?] seated, manipulate the lots;¹⁶ and for whom the lot jumps (out), he brings [it aw]ay [into the temple]; and he places it on the altar.”¹⁷ In this text we find the use of the verb *pulanzi*, which means “manipulating the lot,” as derived from the noun *pul*. From this description we learn that those who participate in this activity are seated, and that the lot has to “jump out.” Afterwards the lot is placed on the altar, in front of the deity.

Further information concerning the Hittite practice may be gathered from a third text, KUB 60.24. In this text we may find an indication that the lots were placed in a stone vessel from which they were to “jump out”. Following is the fragmented text:

9. CAD I/J, 198–202.

10. For the Assyrian, Nuzi, and NB texts see AHW., 881–82. For the attestation in Emar, see D. E. Fleming, *The Installation of Baal’s High Priestess at Emar*, HSS (Atlanta, 1992), 174–76. The rite of the installation of a new priestess *nin.dingir* to the Storm-god of Emar includes the usage of the “lots” to choose one of the daughters of the nobles of Emar. The *pūrē* = “lots” are taken from the temple of another deity, NIN.URTA, and are being “held”—*šabātu* in front of the Storm-god of Emar.

11. The form *pulaḫli*—which could mean “lot caster”—appears in a Hurrian text from Alalah, CHD P/3, 374^b. This does not necessarily mean that the term denotes a specialist, but it could refer to the person who happens to cast the lot.

12. Kellerman, “Further Interpretation,” 40, suggested that “the word *pūl/pūr(u)* might be a cultural term of an unknown origin.”

13. Beckman, “Anatolian Myth,” 20, §§31”–32”.

14. See also the translation of the passage in the CHD P/3, 373^b under a.

15. For this text, see my article, “The EZEN-*pulaš*—‘A Hittite Installation Rite of a New Priest’, in *Light of the Installation of dIM Priestess in Emar*,” JANER 2 (2002), 127–59.

16. I use “manipulate” here and in the following rather than “cast,” since the lots were not cast down, but were handled in such a way that caused them to jump out.

17. For other restorations see Kellerman, “Further Interpretation,” 38–39, and C. Carter, “Hittite Cult-Inventories” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1962), 123–53.

KUB 60.24

Obv. ?

1'	[] 'ku-it' [	
2'	[] x-ti-iš [	
3'	pu-nu-uš-ša-an-du na-an[	let them consult. Him? [
4'	nu IQ-BI pu-ul-li-e-ya pí-eš-š[i-ja-an-du	And he said: "the lots [let them?] throw [
5'	nu-kán ŠA ^{NA4} NUNUZ DUG-i pa-ra- ^r a' [	Into the egg-shaped stone-vessel [
6'	pu-ul-li-e-kán ku-ya-pí an-da [	The lots, into where [
7'	na-at-kán pa-ra-a ú- ^r da ¹ -ir[	And they brought them forth [
8'	na-at 1-aš ya-aḥ-nu-uš-ki-it [	And one kept turning it around [
9'	ya-at!-ku-ut nu me-mi-ir 'ku-ḡ ¹ [a-pí	it jumped. And they said: Wh[ere
10'	[]-x ma-a-an ya-a[t-ku-ut	[]. If it ju[m]ped
11'	[] an- ^r da ¹ x-za ¹⁸ [	

12' [] x-x[

Unfortunately, this tablet is badly broken, but some information can still be salvaged from it, namely that the lots were put into an egg-shaped stone-vessel, which was turned around until one lot jumped out.

The term used in this last text for lots is *pullē* written with double *-l-*. The Chicago Hittite Dictionary accorded it a separate lemma, with the meaning unclear.¹⁹ However, I follow van den Hout in analyzing this form as an attestation of the nom.-acc. plural neuter of the word *pul-* "lot." Van den Hout also reads the form *pullit* in KUB 60.152 as the instrumental form of the word *pul-*.²⁰ In KUB 60.152 a priest is apparently chosen by means of a lot during a festival.²¹

We can therefore say that the Hittite word *pul-* has the plural form *pullē* while the verb form is *pulai-* indicating the process of manipulating the lots. The outcome of the process is indicated by the verb *uatku-* "jump."

As mentioned above, Akkadian has two nouns meaning "lot." The noun *isqu* is used with the verbs *nadû* "to throw," and *maqātu* "to fall." The noun *pūru* is used with the verbs *šalā'u* and *karāru*, both meaning "to put down" and having a secondary meaning "to throw/cast." For example, Shalmanesser III declares on his Black Obelisk that when he stayed in Calah, in his 31st year, he placed the lot in front of the gods Aššur and Adad: *pūru ina pān aššur adad akruru*. The usage of the verb *karāru* here is certainly "to put down" and not "cast" as it has usually been translated.²²

18. Written over an erasure.

19. CHD P/3, 375^b.

20. Theo van den Hout, Review of *KBo.* 60, in *Bi.Or.* 51 (1994), 122.

21. The relevant passage is as follows, obv. i' 16'–21':

16'	[to] the temple they go, and[] of the people of the town of Zuppara
17'	[]. Then by means of whose lot
18'	[] they make. And he calls the SANGA-priests to the house
19'	[] they go. The GUDU-priest the gods
20'	[] and he puts them on the altar.
21'	[] and they sit down to eat.

This text is treated in my article, above n. 15.

22. See, e.g., the latest translation by Grayson, *RIMA* 3/2, 70, lines 174–75: "In my thirty first regnal year, (when) **I** threw the die for the second time before Aššur (and) the god Adad." S. Yamada, *The Construction of the Assyrian Empire: A Historical Study of the Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (859–824 B.C.)*

In both Hittite and Mesopotamian cultures, then, the selected lot was placed in front of the deity.

William Hallo, in an article on the Biblical *Purim* festival,²³ supports a theory with regard to the origin of the Akkadian word *pūru*. In light of the Hittite practice just described, Hallo suggests that the Sumerian word BUR, meaning bowl or vase, is the origin of Akkadian *pūru*. Such Sumerian vases, carrying votive inscriptions which mention the word, have been found in archaeological excavations. This type of vessel may have been used for the casting of lots. Hallo refers to such a vessel, found in Lagaš and published by Henri de Genouillac in the report of the excavations of Telloh.²⁴ The inscription on this vase does not include a direct reference to lots, but rather to the wish for long life for the person by whom it was dedicated. Its shape, however, brings to mind the egg-shaped stone vessel mentioned in the Hittite text.

The Hittite texts do not indicate what the lots themselves were made of, nor what they looked like. The well-known *pūru* of the Assyrian minister Iahali, the grand vizier of Shalmaneser III, which is made of clay in the shape of a little cube, and inscribed on four sides, is just one possible example.²⁵ The end of the inscription on this lot reads as follows: *ina līmešu pūrišu ebūr mat aššur lišir lidmiq ina pan aššur adad pūrišu liddā*: “In his year assigned to him by lot may the harvest of the land of Assyria prosper and thrive, in front of the gods Aššur and Adad may his lot be placed.” The last verb *liddā* has been read by Ernest Michel as *li-l[i]-a* from *elû* “to come up.”²⁶ Hallo read it *liddā* from *nadû* and translated it: “In front of the gods Aššur and Adad may his lot fall.”²⁷ However, following the verb *karāru* in this context of casting lots, we would expect a meaning of “may it be placed.” The verb *nadû* has the meaning “to set, place” objects for exhibit, or sacrifice,²⁸ and it can therefore be translated in this meaning.

There are also indications of Mesopotamian lots made of stone,²⁹ while the Sumerian lots may have been made of wood, as can be gathered from the term GIŠ.ŠUB.BA—“wood that is thrown.”

The current evidence indicates the probable existence of two types of lots: personal ones, inscribed with the owner’s name, such as Iahali’s, and non-personal ones, such as the lots used in Emar during the installation of the high priestess.³⁰ In this last case the lots belong to the temple of ^dNIN.URTA, and are taken to the temple of ^dIM, the Storm-god of Emar, where the process of electing the priestess takes place.

Relating to his Campaigns to the West (Leiden, 2000), 322–25, has a long discussion on the meaning of *pūra karāru* in relation to the choosing of the eponym of the year. He, too, arrived at the conclusion that the verb *karāru* should mean here “to place in front of the deity” (pp. 324–26). See also CAD K, 208–9 in the context of setting things/objects in front of the deity.

23. W. W. Hallo, “The First Purim,” *BA* 46 (1983), 19–29.

24. Henri de Genouillac, *Fouilles de Telloh* (Paris, 1934–36), 128, TG. 697 plate XL and picture 85,2. For Sumerian BUR see now PSD B: 182–85 *bur* A.

25. This lot was first published in YOS 9 (1937) by Ferris J. Stephens, pl. XXVII.

26. E. Michel, “Die Assur-Texte Salmanassars III (858–824),” *WO* 1 (1949), 262–63 (with n. 8).

27. Hallo, “The First Purim,” 20.

28. CAD N, 81^a (*nadû* 2).

29. CAD I/J, 199, 2’ b, s.v. *isqu*.

30. See Fleming, *Installation of Baal’s High Priestess*, 10, 49.

Hallo also proposes that dice, which are known for their use in games of chance, may have been used in the casting of lots. According to him, Palestinian excavations yielded such finds only in early second millennium strata.³¹ However, since then a faience die from the Iron Age was unearthed in Tel Dan, north of the altar room.³² The discovery of the die within the sacred precinct may allude to its use in the casting of lots. Another version of personal lots may have been ostraca inscribed with names, such as those found at Tel Arad.³³

Biblical Hebrew has two nouns for the word “lot”—the Akkadian word *pūru* used once in the book of Esther (3:7), פֹּר, and the more commonly used noun *gôrāl* (גֹּרָל). The verbs used with *gôrāl* are either in the sense of “to throw”—יָדָה, יָרָה, הִטִּיל, or “to come up”—יָצָא, עָלָה. The word *gôrāl* has to do with pebbles, as may be learned from the Arabic (جَرَل), and perhaps also from Isa. 57:6: בַּחֲלָקִי נַחַל חֲלָקֶךָ הֵם הֵם גֹּרְלֶךָ which should be translated: “By river pebbles your share is (determined), they are your lot.” However, there is no direct indication of the way the lots were used.³⁴

A question that would come up in this respect is: what is the relation between the means of revelation called *ʾûrîm wātūmmîm* and the casting of lots? Some scholars have interpreted the *ʾûrîm wātūmmîm* as a lot oracle. However, the casting of lots in the ANE is different from other methods of divination, since it was not used for telling the future, or for making a decision such as whether a king should go out to war; clearly it was not an oracular practice.³⁵ It was used to determine the order of things, or more precisely, to reveal such a predetermined inherent order. It is a relatively sim-

31. Hallo, “The First Purim,” 22.

32. See A. Biran, *Biblical Dan* (Jerusalem, 1994), 199, pl. 37.

33. Hallo, “The First Purim,” refers to Aharoni’s excavations reported in *BA* 31 (1968), 2–32.

34. A. M. Kitz, “The Hebrew Terminology of Lot Casting and its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *CBQ* 62 (2000), 207–14, reviews the terms for lot casting in the Hebrew Bible in comparison with ANE and Greek evidence, and concludes that in the Bible too the practice was to put the lots into a receptacle and shake it to draw one lot. Although her conclusion is plausible, it is based on conjectures which are hardly unequivocal. I also differ with her statement that the use of lots was a form of divination (p. 209); see below.

35. For the different methods of divination, see C. van Dam, *The Urim and Thumim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1997), 197–210. See also W. Horowitz and V. A. Hurowitz, “Urim and Tummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from Assur (LKA 137),” *JANES* 21 (1992), 95–115. The Assyrian text describes a divination process in which one of two types of stones is to jump out of the garment of the diviner. I. L. Finkel, “In Black and White: Remarks on the Assur Psephomancy Ritual,” *ZA* 85 (1995), 271–76, argues, based on a new collation of the text, that the stones were to be dropped over a diagram in which the names of seven gods were inscribed. See also the response by Hurowitz, *JQR* 88 (1998), 263–74. In any case, I believe that this text describes an oracle technique which is markedly dissimilar with the practice of handling lots described herein. A. M. Kitz, “The Plural Form of Urim and Tummim,” *JBL* 116/3 (1997), 401–10, also refers to this problem, mentioning the Hittite KIN-oracle. Although she does not differentiate between the methods, her article makes clear the difference between oracular practices using stones, and the lot casting. One may argue that in none of these cases, not in the Hittite, nor in the Akkadian or the Hebrew, do the nouns: *pul-*, *pūru*, *isqu*, or *gôrāl* appear. H. A. Hoffner, “Ancient Views of Prophecy and Fulfillment: Mesopotamia and Asia Minor,” *JETS* 30 (1987), 257–65, tried to describe all different types of divination which existed in the ANE. Under Kleromancy he included the Hittite KIN-Oracle assuming to be lot-oracle. This was strengthened by a detailed treatment of these texts by A. Archi, “Il sistema KIN della divinazione ittita,” *OA* 13 (1974), 113–44. Again, since *pul-* is not used in these oracles, it does not seem to be part of the practice of casting lots.

ple practice, which did not require the involvement of trained experts or elaborate techniques, as did most methods of divination. The result of the process was assured by divine forces, and for that reason the lots were placed in front of the gods, to re-affirm their involvement and gain their protection.

The technique of the casting of lots among the Hittites, placing lots in a vessel and shaking it to let the chosen one jump out, may have been a common technique throughout the ANE. A similar practice is known from ancient Greece as well; the *Iliad* describes several instances in which casting of lots occurred (III, 315–25; VII, 170–99; XXIII, 352–57). In all instances the participants cast their personal lots into a helmet, which is shaken until a lot jumps out of it. The lots used were either pebbles, or ostraca inscribed with the personal marks of the participants, depending on the case.³⁶ Incidentally, in Greek mythology, too, the Olympian gods divided the universe among themselves through the casting of lots, with Zeus obtaining the rule of heaven.³⁷ Finally, another version of Atra-Ḫasis reads as follows: “The gods grasped the bottle by its neck, cast the lot, and divided (the universe).”³⁸

36. See G. S. Kirk, ed., *The Iliad: A Commentary* Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1985), 311–12; Vol. 2 (1990), 257–59.

37. E. Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston, 1942), 25.

38. W. von Soden, “Die erste Tafel des altbabylonischen Atramḫasis-Mythus. ‘Haupttext’ und Parallelversionen,” *ZA* 68 (1978), 50ff.

