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A Short Note on JA Scurlock's Recent Identification of the *kamantu*-Plant with *Lawsonia inermis* L.

Luc Renaut ¹



In a recent study², JoAnn Scurlock, active and esteemed contributor to the *JMC*³, has proposed to identify the plant *kamantu* with henna (*Lawsonia inermis* L.). Her interpretation of the « ninety-seven ancient Mesopotamian references⁴ to *kamantu* for which the condition to be treated is known » poses several problems which in the present note I would like to submit to *JMC* readers and to JoAnn Scurlock herself.

§ 1 — An implicit and questionable premise of JA Scurlock's argument is that the use of *kamantu* was a rational one, i.e. that it was employed by Mesopotamian physicians for natural (chemical) properties which they knew it to possess. Accordingly, JA Scurlock uses the conditions against which *kamantu* was prescribed as a starting point from which to infer the plant's natural properties. References are duly made to modern medical and chemical experimentations. However, modern experimental conditions generally have nothing to do with ancient uses of *kamantu*. For example, in most cases, *kamantu* appears in receipts mixed with other ingredients⁵, whereas modern scientists, to obtain more convincing results, often extract and concentrate the most active principles of the plant studied by them.

§ 2 — JA Scurlock observes that « most prominent [...] are conditions which produce skin lesions ». About 30 per cent of the 97 known *kamantu* prescriptions are devoted to skin infections and inflammations. This proportion is the main argument invoked by JA Scurlock to identify *kamantu* with henna, on the basis that, as reported in ethnographical literature, henna is often used for skin antiseptics, health and beauty. But, even if the choice of *kamantu* by Mesopotamian physicians were motivated by objective and natural reasons, is *Lawsonia inermis* the one and only botanical candidate still not identified in Cuneiform texts likely to have been used to treat skin diseases at this (rather modest) ratio of 30 per cent ?

§ 3 — Two important characteristics of henna, well known from classical Antiquity to present times, are lacking from the Mesopotamian documentation about *kamantu* :

a) *odoriferous flowers* (henna is grown in gardens for its pleasant scent ; decoctions of its flowers are employed in the manufacture of perfumed ointments) ;

¹ Poitiers.

² JoAnn SCURLOCK, « A Proposal for Identification of a Missing Plant: *Kamantu* / ḪAB.DUH = *Lawsonia inermis* L. / "henna" », *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 97, 2007, pp. 491-520.

³ Outstanding is for me her long and seminal discussion entitled « From Esagil-kīn-apli to Hippocrates », *JMC* 3, 2004, pp. 10-30.

⁴ Usefully gathered, paraphrased and classified by JA Scurlock.

⁵ *Kamantu* is found alone (disregarding oil or beer) in only eleven prescriptions.

b) *leaves with dyeing properties* (a paste prepared from powdered leaves is employed to colour the hair and the skin).

In this regard it is significant that the only part of the *kamantu* plant mentioned in Mesopotamian documentation is the seed (31 occurrences), whereas in the ethnobotanical observations on henna quoted by JA Scurlock there are 54 mentions of leaves, 11 mentions of flowers and only 8 mentions of seeds. Use of henna seed is very rarely documented in ethnographical literature, and non-existent in Greek and Latin sources relating to henna.

§ 4 — Another weakness of JA Scurlock's argument is the absence of reference to the only words for henna which are firmly attested in ancient world, Hebrew *kōper*⁶, Demotic *qwpr*⁷ and Greek *kúpros*⁸, which all share the same trilateral root *kpr*. In a study that has been recently accepted for publication by the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (« Recherches sur le henné antique »), the present writer demonstrates that the name *kpr* (*kōper* / *qwpr* / *kúpros*) for henna does not derive from Akkadian *kpr* (*kapāru* = to smear, *kupru* = bitumen), but was imported into the Near East together with the plant it refers to. This importation did not take place before the second half of the first millenium B.C., and several clues suggest an origin from the southern Red Sea regions.

If *Lawsonia inermis* was cultivated in Mesopotamia under the name *kamantu* long before the Graeco-Roman period, as JA Scurlock claims, how then to explain that in classical Antiquity the only name for henna used in the eastern Mediterranean has no etymological connection with the name *kamantu* ?

The best answer is probably that *kamantu* never referred to *Lawsonia inermis*.

⁶ *The Song of Songs*, 1:14; 4:13.

⁷ *P. Harkness*, I, 12-20; *P. Vienna* 6257, XIV, 17; *P. Leyden* 383, VIII, 5; XXIII, 10-12.

⁸ THEOPHRASTUS, *De odoribus*, §§ 25, 26, 27, 31, 50, 55 ; DIOSCORIDES, *De materia medica*, I, 95.