1. The interpretation of the Ugaritic term gbr, attested in the ritual tablet KTU 1.40, is a problematic one. In 1966 Gordon 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 Selms, Weippert, and Xella, has been recently reaffirmed by de Moor and Sanders in a new and detailed study of KTU 1.40.

The interpretation of gbr, 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 gbr with the famous Habiru, it requires «a variant spelling of the name of Ḥapiru (normally ‘prm in Ugaritic’)», whereas the alternance g/l is unattested in Ugaritic. In addition, the term gbr does not have the -y, typical of the gentilics. The argument is also supported by the fact that every gentilic (Qty, Ddmy, Ḥry, Ḥty, 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 gbr 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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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 2e 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 g/l 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.
comparative survey does not offer much material suitable to the context of KTU 1.40, 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 qaṣida of al-Hārit, 44-45, one may read the following passage:

44 a'ālaynā gunānū Kindata an yagnama gāziyīhīnī
wamīnā al-gazā'u
45 am 'ālaynā 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 Ḥanifah 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 gāzi (aggressor, one who makes a raid) the term gabrā'u is to be interpreted as «robbers, plunderers*. Such a use of the root gbr is very rare in Arabic where it usually means both «to go by, to pass» or «dust» ¹².

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

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-Hārit b. Hilliza: 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 Ḥanīfa,) / les va-t-en guerre, par année de cendre ameutes?». Apparently, the term gabrā'u is not viewed as meaning «robbers» but «cendre» (?). A most reasonable interpretation of this passage is by Th. Noldeke «oder was eine staubbedeckte (Schar) von den Muḥārib zusammengebracht hat» (Th. Noldeke, Fünf Mo'allaqāt übersetzt und erklärt von Th. Noldeke I. Die Mo'allaqāt des 'amr und des Hārit, 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 graffiiti 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.

At any rate the meaning «robber, thief» is confirmed by ibn Manẓūr, 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-sa'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.

The noun gabrāh, normally meaning «dust», may also have a negative connotation. Of particular interest is the use of the noun gabarāh in the Quran 80, 40 where it is said that those who shall have the face covered with dust (gabarāh - qatarah) are to be considered as unbelievers and liars (kaffarah - fagarah). 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 Huwaydar 1, 6, Huwaydar 2, 8 and RÊS 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 ḫarīrū 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 (ḫabbātu, «to spoil, to rob») than in Ugaritic. On the basis of the present parallel, therefore, on may conclude that the most reasonable candidate for interpreting Ugaritic gbr would seem to be «robber», and the usual translation «Ḥabiru» 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.

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