a shift from mundane to personal astrology, and may be in part attributable to this very shift.

Baigent’s claim that this change came about as a result of Persian influence cannot be supported, since there is no evidence of personal astrology in the Zoroastrian corpus.50

Finally a word on the authors of the corpus we have tried to elucidate: the magicians, diviners and healers of ancient Mesopotamia. On the one hand they were the champions of the theistic system, composing and adapting texts, and educating the public while making house calls; on the other hand they kept lapsing into holistic modes of thought and presentation. A likely explanation for this remarkable ambivalence lies in their position betwixt centre and population. They catered not only to the needs of the state, but also to that of the public, where at least part of their pay and unavoidably some of their ideas came from.

1 Incantations and the Literary Corpus

One of the Old Babylonian Eduba texts, commonly called ‘The Supervisor and the Scribe’, consists of a discussion between an ugula (‘supervisor’) and a pupil of the scribal school. The supervisor is the first to speak, and for almost thirty lines he showers the young scribe with admonitions and good advice. In short, he incites him to be a good, obedient pupil, and to listen carefully to what the uummia says, as he himself, the ugula, had always done when he was young. Then the schoolboy is introduced, ironically, as a humble man of learning:2

29 dub-sar umun-ak suna-ra-bi ugula-a-ni mu-na-ni-ib-gi, gi
30 ud mu-umu-gin; ab-ṣidda-en-na-a ba-an-gi, bi a-ra-ab-ha-za
31 mu-gud-gin, i-šu diq-gi-zu-še giš i-ša-a-bi
32 lu-zi-nu nam-mu-ni-ib-ku, ku, diš-kun ga-ra-ni-ib-gi

The scribe, the man of learning, humbly replied to his supervisor:

‘As to the incantation that you recited. I have its antiphon (ready) for you,
And to your oxen-like sweet moaning its refutation.3
You will not turn me into a nitwit! I will answer you but once’.4

1 This paper gained much from critical and stimulating remarks by Prof. Dr. Tezi Ahash, Dr. Jan van Ginkel, Femke Kramer, Dr. H.L.J. Vanstiphout, and the participants in the Conference on Mesopotamian Magic. To all I wish to express my sincere thanks.

2 Sources for these lines: SLFM 114 (Ni 424) + ISJT 2, 84 (Ni 4092); SRT 27; TIME NF 3, 37; FS Hilprecht, 19, SLM 59; ISJ 2, 84 (Ni 4092); SLFM 47 (SN-T 971, 388); SLFM 47 (SN-T 906, 231); SLFM 47 (SN-T 927, 517). Variants are orthographic in kind, and are disregarded here. On Eduba C see C. Wilcke: Kollationen zu den numerischen litterarischen Texten aus Nippur in der Hej overicht Sammlung Iena (ASAW 65, 4; Berlin, 1976), 341, with additional sources in SLFM 47, and ISJT 2, 84. The join of the prism fragments SLFM 114 (Wilcke’s source B) with ISJT 2, 84 (Ni 4092) has not been tested on the actual fragments, but is clear enough from the copies. The lines preceding Eduba C on this prism preserve the end of School days, and must be added to the list of sources for this composition in P. Anigvet, Eléments de linguistique sumérienne, La construction de ovi/ovi ‘day’ (OBO Sonderband, Götingen, 1993), 34. The prism fragments CBS 19826 (one side published in S.N. Kramer, Schooldays: a Sumerian Composition Relative to the Education of a Scribe (Museum Monographs; Philadelphia, 1949 = JASS 69 (1949), 199-215, Placi III, see p.4) may belong to the same piece.

3 Lines 30 and 31 are parallel in construction, sharing one verb (a-ra-ab-ha-za). The construction ud ... a (temporal clause) with a second person verbal form in 30 corresponds to mu ... še (‘I exchange for’), with a second person possessive pronoun in 31. Giš i-ša-a-b is interpreted here as a verbal form, corresponding to the fossilized form ba-an-giš (see PSM B V), which has the same inanimate possessive -b. The tentative translation ‘refutation’ or ‘fight’ for giš i-ša-a is based on a number of lexical texts: giš-giš = nannu-anum (P. Kgal bilinguale, MSL 13, 38), giš-lá = šanumum, giš-láša = taqumptum (Antongil III, 1977, MSL, 17, 157). See moreover SSM: ALAN 7, 135 (MSL 16, 109): giš-iša = ṣepāša ša kakku. I am not aware of any other attestations of a verb giš - lá. It is assumed that the form used here is a playful derivation of the well known noun, in common parallelism with ba-an-giš. I owe these observations to Dr. H.L.J. Vanstiphout. For another interpretation of giš - lá (and this passage) see Hesperia, 58 (1968), 157f.
This speech of the damu eduba might be deemed improper, but it is most revealing for the present subject. In order to say 'shut up, you're talking nonsense', the student compares his ugula first with someone reciting incantations, and second with a belowing ox. From the perspective of the eduba, the centre of literary learning, reciting incantations amounts to the same thing as bovine mooing. In other words, if we want to incorporate incantation texts into the literary corpus, we are not likely to receive support from our ancient colleagues. Incantations are not literary texts. Therefore, the recent studies by Michalowski, Reiner, Cooper, and the present writer, in which incantations are analysed from the poetical point of view, require explicit justification. The perspective under which we analyse and interpret our material, and the labels we use, are important determinants for the outcome of our investigations. Incantations are not meant to entertain, to display verbal virtuosity, or to construct imagined worlds. They are meant to be used in magic rituals, in order to influence the course of events. Bearing this in mind, let us look in detail at a short Akkadian incantation from Ur. This example, as most examples I will use here, is from the Old Babylonian period.

4 The two images may belong together, since mas-mas is almost onomatopoetic for "mooing". That the very profession was felt to be higher than that of conjurer is confirmed in Proverb Collection 2 no. 54 (line 15): "an unsuccessful scribe, he will be an incantation priest" (E. I. Gordon, Samariān Proverbs. Glosseys of E∂erday Life in Ancienar Mesopotamia (New York, 1968), 211.

5 That is, the corpus of literary or poetic texts strictly speaking. This is not to say that incantations were not treated in the eduba. Evidence of this use is found in a literary letter, edited by J. A. van Dijk, 'Ein spätbabylonischer Katalog einer Sammlung sumerischer Briefe', Or 58 (1989), 441-452, and in a number of incantation tablets, which appear to be school copies, see most recently Wietzold and Vidal, 'Eine sumerische Beschwingung', Oriani 26 (1986), 291-298; edition of an Ur III tablet with an incantation written over an erased business text, probably both exercises. Old Babylonian examples of school copies may be SEIN 6; GECT V, 55 and JOS XI, 68. Michalowski (Review of GECT V, JNES 37 (1978), 342-346, esp. 345) identified the text on the "ban" GECT V, 55 as an extract from TIM IX, 63:17-20 (Lamium, edition by M. V. Tonietti, 'Un incantatorio sumerico contro la Lamasu', Or 48 (1979), 301-323). According to Westenholz, 'Old Akkadian School texts. Some Goals of Sargonic Scribal Education', AJO 25 (1974-1977), 95-110, some of the Old Akkadian incantations should also be related to the school, either as exercises or as example texts, but the point is difficult to prove. The famous Plaque Diorite of Urnammu was interpreted by J.S. Cooper, Studies in Mesopotamian Lapidary Inscriptions II, RA 74 (1980), 101-110, esp. 103-104, as an exercise on a broken piece of stone, juxtaposing two unrelated texts: an incantation and a building inscription (K. K. Human, 'A Second Chronicle of Gudea', JNES 23 (1964), 24-211). This interpretation, however, was not accepted by T. Jacobsen, 'Ur-Nansu's Diorite Plaque', Or 54 (1965-67), 65-72, who treated the text as a unity concerning the erection of a reed but for incantatory purposes. This is not to suggest that the writer was not concerned with incantations, but simply that our own literary corpus is not easy to define. Our own literary corpus is not easy to define. Our own literary corpus is not easy to define. 10


9 N.C. Veldhuis, 'The Heart Graa and Related Matters', OLP 21 (1990), 27-44; idem, A Cow of Stout (Groningen, 1991); idem, 'The Fly, the Worm and the Chant. Old Babylonian Chant Incantations', OLP 24 (1993), 41-64.


The Poetry of Magic

1 iz'amman -kīma šamu Like a shower he is raining down
2 elli'at Nergal Nergal's saliva.
3 e-li At-ber-atišu Let his saliva because of juicence
4 liyiqiš īna awurt iqinim turn as yallow as a turtle.
5 šipat āvarrruqīti Incantation against juicence.

Leaving aside the subscript, this incantation consists of only two sentences. Both sentences contain a preposition, indicated by kīma, and both contain the same word for saliva. Both sentences are divided into two, with alternation of three and two beat verses. The three beat verses are those containing the word kīma. The two sentences, thus connected by both formal and lexical means, are at the same time contrasted on various levels. The subject of the first verb, in the indicative, is the patient: 'the rains down', which is taken to mean here: he drools. This, apparently, is meant to be the actual description of one of his symptoms. The subject of the second verb, in the preclusive, is 'his saliva' ('may his saliva turn yellow'). The second sentence has an additional element, an adverbial phrase ('by means of the juicence') by which the incantation is closed. In the first sentence zānamu is used transitively, with 'Nergal's saliva' as object. The second sentence is intransitive. However, the subject of iz'amman is only expressed in the verbal form, so that both sentences have (apart from the comparative) only one nominal phrase. The chiasmatic structure may be represented as follows:

V1 - iz'amman
S1
Nebj - kīma šamu

S2
Nebj - elli Nergal

S3
Nebj - e-li At-ber-atišu

V2 - īna awurt iqinim
The relation between Nabû, and Nṣḫḫ, is lexical (ellīt Nergal – elligišu). Nergal’s saliva’ takes the final position in the first sentence, whereas ‘his saliva’ is put in initial position in the second. The juxtaposition of nearly identical expressions tightly connects the two halves of the incantation.

The two sentences display various linguistic oppositions, expressing the functional opposition between the description and the supplication. The symptoms of the patient are related to the supernatural world by equating his saliva with Nergal’s saliva. To this is then transferred the ‘yellowness’ of the jaundice, and with it the patient will lose the illness. This, at least, is the way I understand the idea behind the text.

This incantation against jaundice is not a literary text, and does not show any literary pretensions. The choice of the turtle in the comparison works as a rather arbitrary selection from anything green or yellow. The lay-out of the tablet upon which the text is written is clearly not intended to raise the reader’s expectations of literary enjoyment. The mere fact that application of poetic analysis yields results does not suffice for its justification. Even superficial experience with statistical analysis will make clear that no matter how empty the question is, the computer will always provide an answer. In other words: a good answer is not worth much without a good question. If a literary methodology clearly yields results in analysing an incantation without literary pretensions, what do these results mean, and how are we going to use such results in a broader understanding of magic?

2 Poetics and Persuasive Language

We can turn to Roman Jakobson’s definition of the poetic function of verbal communication. The poetic function is one of the six functions distinguished by Jakobson, among which are the emotive and the referential. Each of the functions is directed at, or focused on one of the six aspects of verbal communication. Thus the emotive function is directed at the sender of the message, the referential function at the context. The poetic function concentrates on the message itself. In a celebrated formula, Jakobson defined the poetic function as the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. ‘I like Ike’; the slogan used in the campaign for Eisenhower’s election, uses a phonic relation to suggest and enhance a relation of meaning. By choosing other options from the axis of selection we would get ‘We like Ike’, or ‘I want Ike’, or even ‘I want Eisenhower’, which, in certain respects, are all more appropriate than ‘I like Ike’, but clearly less efficacious. Jurij Lotman, working in the same tradition of literary and linguistic research, defined poetic language by the principle of feedback, or repetition. The poetic text breaks the normal linear development of linguistic meaning by referring back to earlier pieces of the message. This is done by repetitions of all kinds: lexical repetition, syntactic parallelism, rhyme, or related phenomena. Repetition of whatever kind always implies both similarity and contrast. Lotman’s definition focuses on the reception of a poetic message, whereas Jakobson’s can be understood as reconstructing the production of a poetic message. For our purpose the two definitions are equivalent. The advantage of Jakobson’s definition is that he relates the concept of poetic language to a general theory of verbal communication.

Jakobson insisted that the poetic function is not restricted to poetry. Referential, conative, poetic and other functions are always present, in any verbal communication, but their relative importance varies. Thus the system of different functions is not a matter of exclusively discrete entities, but of the dominance of one function over the others. Consequently, the study of the poetic function should be extended beyond the limits of poetry strictly speaking, and the study of poetics should be extended beyond the limits of the poetic function. Jakobson’s theoretical approach implies that we are justified in analysing the poetic function in any document, even a lexical list. But there may be better uses of time. We have to explore, therefore, the relative importance of the poetic function in incantations, and the place this function has in the pragmatics of magic.

Various authors have discussed the relation between rhetoric and magic, beginning with Gorgias in the fifth century BCE. The common element is the intention not to express one’s feelings, or to communicate a state of events, but to change something, be it the curing of an illness or the opinion of your adversaries. In Jakobson’s terms, not the emotive or referential, but the conative function, directed at the receiver of the message, is central here. A convincing argument can be conceived as the successful production of relations of meaning by the receiver. This production may be supported by poetic means. We can again cite the ‘I like Ike’ slogan here. The poetic function of language serves to associate sounds, words, or syntactic structures, which are similar, and thus suggests the relation of meaning which is to be communicated. In slogans the poetic function is subservient to the conative function, producing a balance of rhyme and reason.

Poetic language, used in support of an argument, is fairly common in incantations. I will take as an example one of the Old Babylonian childbirth incantations. I cite the first part of this text, with the translation by Jo-Ann Scurlock:

1. ina me nākim
2. ibbani esentum
3. ina šir širānim
4. ibbani lilidum
5. ina me ayābbi šamātum
6. palītīm

From the fluids of intercourse was
created a skeleton,
from the tissue of the muscles was
created an offspring.
In the turbulent and fearful sea waters,

12 From another point of view the turtle may have been relevant if something like turtle shell belonged to the medication.
13 The table does not fit the typology of Old Babylonian literary tablets. The lay-out is the lay-out of a letter, with no correspondence between lines on the tablet and major syntactic categories (even the subscripts is divided into two lines, which is very uncommon in Old Babylonian incantations). In the original publication, the text was taken to be a meteorological report, and classified among letters and related texts.
16 On Gorgias see G. R. Lloyd, Magic, Reason and Experience. Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science (Cambridge, 1979), 83ff, and J. de Romilly, Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece (Cambridge, Mass., 1975). Gorgias’ texts have not been transmitted directly, his ideas are known from citations by other ancient authors. The authenticity, however, does not seem to be in doubt.
The description of the condition of the baby is skilfully connected with mythological allusions, so as to include the world of the gods into the problem. This is a common device. It is also used, for instance, in the Heart Grass incantations, where the etiology of a disease is traced back to the Sun god’s picking of a forbidden herb (Reiner, ‘The Heart Grass’, Veldhuis, ‘The Heart Grass and Related Matters’). The very invocation of magical means implies that a relation is sought with supernatural forces. The request for help is underpinned by arguing that otherworldly forces had a part in the problem from the start.

In the incantation, poetic means are used to support this argument. The first four clauses begin with ina: ina mē nākim, ina šīr šīrānim, ina mē ayabba, and ina mē tūmānim. The first two of these describe the situation as a natural phenomenon: procreation through intercourse, and the steady growth of the child in the womb of the mother. The second pair describes an awesome, mythic place: the turbulent, fearful waters of the sea, the distant waters of the ocean. The two pairs of clauses are marked as such by numerous similarities. The first two lines are perfectly parallel, using the same verbal form and the same syntactic construction. They intend to describe the same process:

\[ \text{ina mē nākim ibbani esemtan} \]
\[ \text{ina šīr šīrānim ibbani līlīdum} \]

The second pair is differentiated from the first in syntactic construction and in the extensive use of adjectives. The similarity between these two clauses is semantic, syntactic, and phonemic:

\[ \text{ina mē ayabba Šamūtīm palītān} \]
\[ \text{ina mē tūmānim ruqātin} \]

The phonemic similarities are mostly located in the masculine plural adjectives in -ūtim, and, of course, in the repetition of ina mē. Generally, in Akkadian poetic language, the second of a pair will be longer than the first. That is the case in the first pair, where šīr šīrānim has one syllable more than mē nākim. In the second pair this is not the case, but the exception is only apparent. These are not sentences; they are adverbial expressions introducing two dependent clauses and a main clause. The two dependent clauses again take two perspectives: a natural one and a mythological one. First the child, with his arms bound, and then the sun, who is unable to reach with his light the place of terror.

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In this incantation the female demon Lamastu is introduced in a threefold way: by an acrostic (1–2), a description of her appearance (3–7), and the description of the occasion that necessitated this ritual (8–9). The three elements from which this retrospective part is made up are connected in a sophisticated way by the alternation of similarity and contrast. The acrostic describes Lamastu’s creation by the major gods of the pantheon: Anum, Ea, and Enil. The three verbal forms are preterites, all containing a long i and the suffix -ki. The first two sentences are syntactically parallel: Anum ilniti Ei urabbiš. The third line is longer, because it has two objects, a direct and an indirect object. Moreover, the subject is placed at the marked final position: pâni labbatam tšimtši Enil. In rhythm, the third sentence, having four beats, counterbalances the first two sentences, which have two beats each. The aetiology is thus a fine example of balance between similarity and contrast on various levels. Moreover, the final sentence provides the transition to the descriptive part of the introduction, where Lamastu’s outward appearance is characterized. It is focused on her arms, including hands and fingers. The description continues with a description of her known behaviour. The

appearance is described in stative forms, the behaviour in durative forms. The behaviour described is entering a house and slipping through the door-pivot. The two verbs used provide an inner rhyme: irrub, illap. The description of behaviour fades into the occasion: the last sentence of the description is repeated almost verbatim, but changed into the preterite, to indicate an actual event (indicated in the translation by the use of ‘this’):

ilâlap serrâm tšamar šešram

Now she slipped in past the door-pivot and saw this child.

The introduction, with its individual sections tightly connected, produces a verbal representation of Lamastu, provided with a history and with various attributes. The verbal symbol is a verbal effigy, which can be manipulated much like a material effigy. A material effigy can be mutilated, destroyed or thrown into the river. A verbal effigy can be manipulated by verbal means. A number of imperatives in the second half of the incantation are aimed at her arms, her fingers, the parts of the body on which the description was concentrated:

Retract your fingers!
Loosen your grip (literally: loosen your arms).

Other elements of the introduction resumed in the second half are Ea (line 20), one of the gods responsible for her creation, and the pivot of the door (line 14).

In the penultimate sentence Lamastu is threatened:

They will fill your mouth with earth
your face with dust,
and with seeds of fine cress
your eyes.

The section has one verb, which serves in three syntactically parallel sentences. In each sentence a part of her face is filled with something. It gives a triple repetition of the suffix -ki, accompanied by an abundance of i sounds: pîkî; pânikî; tûkî. This triple repetition -ki in the description of her elimination, resumes the triple repetition of the suffix -ki in the description of her creation in the opening lines. The two sets of three lines have much in common, including the conclusion by a longer line, and the placement in this last line of the verb in the unusual penultimate position. Not only here, but in the whole second half of the incantation ilâlap appears as a prominent phonemic combination, mostly as the feminine suffix of the second person. It continues to be used in the concluding sentence:

utonomki māmât Ei
u tatâllâkî

Let us pause for a moment to see these elements of rhyme in a wider context. A considerable part of the rhyme in this incantation and in the childbirth text discussed above
depends on morphological or syntactic similarities. This kind of rhyme is considered weak or poor in the poetic systems of modern European languages. The judgement that some types of rhyme are richer than other types implies that rhyme cannot simply be defined in terms of repetition of sounds. The most complete repetition of sounds is the repetition of the same word, but this is hardly considered ‘rhyme’ to modern taste. The quality of rhyme in some piece of poetry is, therefore, not only judged by the degree of audible similarity, but also by the way this similarity is produced. Rhyme is a device to connect linguistic entities, and is superimposed over the rules of normal syntax. It has a semantic function, and the richness or barrenness of rhyme is measured against this function. As any linguistic device, however, this function may differ in different traditions. Lotman argues that in modern poetry rhyme serves to connect the intrinsically unconnected.23 Rhyme words, dissimilar in meaning or grammatical form, are related in the reading process in order to construct new and unpredictable relations of meaning. This novelty and originality belong to the pleasure of reading modern poetry.

In medieval aesthetics, on the other hand, the new, unpredicted, or original was not valued in the same way. This is part of what Jauss has called the alterity of medieval literature. The appreciation of a piece of verbal art by a medieval public was not based upon the evocation of a unique, self-sufficient fictitious world, but primarily upon clever variations of well-known patterns. Medieval literature tends to use the ‘already known’ as stable material for the construction of a new work.24 Similarly, grammatical rhyme (repeating the same suffix) or even tautological rhyme (repeating the same word) may be used to create strings of lines expressing the same idea in a catalogue-like manner.25 In other words: rhyme belongs to the prevalent poetic system. Its position within the system and its realisation will differ between individual literary systems. A comparable phenomenon is the wholesale repetition of narrative sections in literary texts. Of our conception, this is a poor technique, sometimes explained away by referring to its advantage for memorization. Still, the device is so common that we must conclude that it appealed to Babylonian taste, and was, in fact, part of the poetic system. Its actual use is far more sophisticated and relevant for narrative strategy than is usually accepted.24 Similarly, grammatical rhyme may turn out to be rich rhyme in Old Babylonian aesthetics, as seems to be the case in the example at hand.25

3.2 The Poetic Use of Magic

The context of an incantation in a magic ritual and in the magic tradition affects the poetic effectiveness. The incantation text is one element of a more complex magic ritual, though for Old Babylonian magic this is often the only element we have. The poetics of the ritual are not confined to the verbal element but extend over the various symbolic systems used in the magical transfer of attributes. The Lamassu incantation discussed above provides a negative example. Old Babylonian incantations in Akkadian are rarely accompanied by separate ritual instructions. In this incantation some passages clearly refer to the manipulation of symbols. This is especially the case in the section discussed above:

They will fill your mouth with earth,
your face with dust,
and with seeds of fine cress
your eyes.

It may be assumed that the recitation of this part of the text was accompanied by a ritual act on a symbol of Lamassu’s face. This symbol may have been a representation of a lion’s face, but not necessarily so. The mechanics of association and symbolization allow the participants to use a symbol that is in some way related to Lamassu’s face or to a lion’s face, but may not be readily recognizable as such to us. The assumed object, whatever it was, represented Lamassu’s face. The symbolic relations were not confined to inner textual features, but extended to the other matter magica. Since the object is unknown, the implications of this relation for our poetic understanding of the text are unknown as well, and this may explain why the passage affects us as an intrusion, an extrinsic piece.

Texts are part of a tradition, and receive their meaning against the background of that tradition. A text is understood and valued by putting it into relations of similarity and contrast with the rules, the possibilities and impossibilities governing the textual type at a given point in time.26 The position of the utummika formula at the end of the incantation works as an enforcement of the following imperative: go! In Old Babylonian Akkadian

23 See H.R. Jauss, ‘Alterser und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur. Geschichte der Ansätze 1556–1756’, in: Alterser und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1955–1976 (Münchenu, 1977), 9–47, esp. 14–18. This characterization does not imply, of course, that innovations are absent in medieval poetry or that modern literature is not rooted in traditions. Tradition and innovation necessarily belong together and are inseparable without each other. The alterity is situated in the relative stress on one of the two poles and the conscious use of the one rather than the other in the literary production (as well as in the less conscious expectations of the public).


25 The theoretical problem here is similar to the problem of rhythm and metre, discussed in note 11. In order to understand any poetry, its poeties must be known. The problem is not doubt circular, since poeties can only be known from poetry. But this point is a general one, not differing in kind from the problems encountered in understanding poetry of a less remote past.

26 This point was already made by Tünnemos in 1924 (The Problem of Verse Language), but was forcefully restated by Jauss in his programmatic article ‘Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft’ (H.R. Jauss, ‘Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft’, in: Literaturgeschichte als Provokation (Frankfurt am Main, 1970; originally published in 1967), 144–207). The relation between interpretation and the available set of genres and types makes apparent the historical character of interpretation (history of reception).
incantations such formulas are generally placed between a retrospective part, describing the problem, and a prospective part, announcing the elimination of the problem. The transfer of a conventional formula to the end yields a more than average force. Another example of how tradition works is the use of the words serru, 'door-pivot', sehru, 'child', and sēru, 'desert', in this incantation. The phonemic similarities between the three words are exploited throughout the text. Lamāštī is associated with the serru, the door-pivot past which she enters. First this word is used to emphasize the danger for the sehru: ilhap serran ilmar sehram. Later on in the text the same serru is associated with Lamāštī's true homeland: the sēru. The poetic procedure is in itself understandable. It gets its true meaning, however, from the place of sēru and serru in the general symbolic system within which the incantation is to be located. And this is not irrelevant to the poetic analysis. Along with other lintal images the door-pivot belongs to the stock symbols of Old Babylonian magic. The same holds true for the desert, the non-cultivated, non-human space, where demons roam freely. The associations of sēru and serru with sehru are, therefore, no casual words play. They are heavily charged with meaning within the system of Mesopotamian magic. Such connotations, determined by the magic tradition, cannot fail to influence the poetic production of meaning.

3.3 ‘Mumbo-Jumbo’ or the Magic Poetics of Gibeberish

The verbal parts of a magic ritual obey rules that do not fundamentally differ from those governing the other materia magica. The transfer of a property is achieved by the symbolic manipulation of similarities. In most cases, however, the materia magica is characterized by more than just some similarity. The objects used must be pure, they must be collected at night, or derive from a strange country. In other words, they must be set apart from ordinary objects. Thus, they are made appropriate for use in a sacred context.27 This is another perspective from which we can discuss the language of incantations.

Magic language is usually distinguished from ordinary language.28 There are, in principle, three ways to achieve such a distinction. The first is to use a sacred language. The second to use poetic, heightened language. These two options are, in fact, available for a large variety of purposes where a text must be marked as other than ordinary. Thus, a large proportion of the scholarly works in classical Greece are written in verse. During a long period of European history the same functional place was occupied by Latin, a language only accessible to the initiated. A third possibility is almost restricted to magic or ritualistic uses of language, and that is Mumbo-Jumbo.29 All three possibilities are used in Mesopotamian magic. We have discussed the poetic use of language in a few

27 The ‘sacred’ as against the ‘profane’ was redefined by Tammib in more general terms as two orderings of reality, or orientations on the world. They are opposed by ‘participation’ as against ‘causality’. See S.J. Tammib, Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 84–110.


29 It should be stressed here that Mumbo-Jumbo is not meant as a derogatory term, and is not equivalent to nonsense or emptiness. ‘Relevance’ is an assumption underlying the interpretation and functionality of all communication, but this relevance is more often than not different from the literal (translatable) meaning of an utterance. For the concept ‘relevance’ see D. Sperber and D. Wilson, Relevance: Communication and Cognition (Oxford, 1980, 1995).
Mumbo-Jumbo. In language, even in Mumbo-Jumbo, a random string of sounds is inconceivable, since it would be mere noise. The absence of regularity on the levels of syntax and grammar is compensated by other linguistic means through an abundance of repetition. The tension between ‘rhythm’ and ‘syntax’, described by Brik as the very essence of poetic language, is almost completely resolved in favour of rhythm (in this case the regular repetition of a word), much like the ‘transrational poets’ who treated semantics as a secondary, or even negligible element of poetry. In Jakobson’s terms, the absence of syntax is the neglect of the rules of contagion on the axis of combination. These rules have been taken over completely by the principles of equivalence normally governing the axis of selection. In other words, as far as these passages are effective, it is a poetic effectiveness. The passages discussed use simultaneously all three devices to distinguish their language from the ordinary. They are in poetic Mumbo-Jumbo Sumerian.

With these examples I hope to have demonstrated the existence and the importance of the poetic function in incantations. There is no need to include incantations in the literary corpus to allow for this conclusion. We are still not in the position, except in very impressionistic terms, to judge their poetic quality. I assume this quality cannot compete with the great works of literary art in the Old Babylonian eduba. But I, for one, take ‘oxen-like moaning’ for priggish conceitess.

Freud and Mesopotamian Magic

M.J. Geller

It is a pity that Sigmund Freud knew so little about Mesopotamia. Freud’s library, now housed in the Freud Museum in Hampstead, contains many more books on archaeology and Classical civilization than on psychology, and his collection of antiquities (many of which are presumed to be forgeries) reflects Freud’s keen interest in the ancient world. His seminal work, Totem and Taboo, demonstrates that Freud somehow had a good grasp of ancient mentality, and had he had a knowledge of Mesopotamian magic, his analysis could have yielded interesting results.

There may be some point, therefore, in considering the possible psychological impact of Mesopotamian magic, such as the Utukku Lemnātu incantations which were presumably used in some form of therapy with a patient. Utukku Lemnātu is a useful compilation to begin with, since in some ways it is just what it purports to be, namely the fullest description of the evil demons from any Mesopotamian text, although without reference to etiology or any philosophy of demonology. Utukku Lemnātu provides rich accounts of demons and ghosts, replete with metaphors and similes, bringing us closer to a general understanding of demons as the agents which most directly affected a patient’s psyche; the very appearance of the demon inspired fear, and the suggestion of the demon’s presence acted as a threat. The utukku demon is among the most commonly mentioned, and the term utukku is virtually generic for ‘demon’. The utukku is described as a ghost, then as a ‘herald’, and even as a robber.

The evil utukku-demon, who is hostile in appearance, and who is tall in stature, is not a god – but his voice is great, and his radiance is lofty.

His shadow is dusky, it is darkened, there is no light in his body.

He always slinks around in secret places, he does not come forth brazenly.

Gall is always dripping from his talons, his tread is harmful poison.

His belt cannot be loosened, his arms burn.

He fills the target of his anger with tears, the world cannot restrain a lament.

1 I wish to thank my NIAS colleagues Andrzei Nowak, F.A.M. Wiggermann, and Wim van Binsbergen for advice on Freudian, textual, and anthropological matters. A more general survey of this material has appeared in Folklore 108 (1997), 1–7, by the present author.

2 Unfortunately, the descriptions in the texts do not often match up with the artistic representations of demons on cylinder seals and reliefs.

3 Utukku Lemnātu (hereafter UL) 12:14–20. Since translations of the text are cited here throughout, it might be useful to provide a progress report on the edition of Utukku Lemnātu incantations. Work began on these incantations some 20 years ago, with some progress made with the edition of the Sumerian forerunners (M.J. Geller, Forerunners to Uduq-ubal (Stuttgart, 1985)). Since then other forerunners have been identified, and we now have OB and MB exemplars of Utukku Lemnātu for tablets 2–8 and 12. The full bilingual edition of Utukku Lemnātu consists of approximately 2000 lines of text, compiled by the ancient scribes into a sixteen-tablet series. All of the component tablets have now been identified, although Tablets 1 and 9 are fragmentary. The first two tablets contain an unusual mixture of Akkadian and bilingual texts, while Tablet 11 of Utukku Lemnātu incorporates the Akkadian incantation known separately as ‘Marduk’s Address to the
ANCIENT MAGIC AND DIVINATION I

Edited by

Tzvi Abusch and Ann K. Guinan

MESOPOTAMIAN MAGIC
TEXTUAL, HISTORICAL, AND
INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Editors

Tzvi Abusch
Karel van der Toorn

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This book owes its existence to the co-operation of six specialists in such different fields as Assyriology, History of Religions, and Cultural Anthropology. Invited by the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) at Wassenaar, The Netherlands, they formed a theme group on ‘Magic and Religion in the Ancient Near East’ during the academic year 1994–95. The group consisted of Trivi Abusch (Waltham), Wim van Binsbergen (then Amsterdam & Leiden, now Rotterdam & Leiden), Mark Geller (London), Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem), Karel van der Toorn (then Leiden, now Amsterdam), and Frans Wiggermann (Amsterdam). Located in adjoining offices along the same corridor, they worked both on individual and on common projects.

One of the delights of our year was a weekly series of Wednesday evening seminars. These meetings offered members of the theme group the chance to present and discuss their ongoing research projects in an informal framework which was intensely collegial and highly critical at the same time. Several scholars from outside NIAS joined us on occasion; among them were Joris Borghouts (Leiden), Theo van de Hout (Amsterdam), and Henk Versnel (Leiden). The organization of a conference on Mesopotamian magic was one of the common projects of the group. Planned for the end of the ten months’ stay at NIAS, the conference was discussed and prepared during a number of the weekly seminars. Some of the contributions to the present book by members of the group grew out of these seminars. Other contributions were not presented in the Wednesday evening meetings, but would never have seen the light of day without them. We feel that the weekly opportunity for debate and exchange of ideas was one of the most rewarding experiences of our year as NIAS fellows.

The conference on Mesopotamian magic was held 6–9 June, 1995, at the premises of NIAS. A group of about fifteen colleagues came to Wassenaar to join the six resident fellows for three days of presentations and discussion on exorcistic texts and practices from Mesopotamia. In addition to the contributors to this book, the late Jan van Dijk and Klaas R. Veerman read papers at the conference. The meetings gave a central place to interpretation. The organizers felt that the study of Mesopotamian magic had been dominated by philology at the expense of an effort to make sense of the texts from a number of interpretive perspectives. Though several contributors presented new texts at the conference, most participants presented either interpretive surveys of the material or close readings of specific texts.

The emphasis on interpretation is reflected in the division of this book. It opens with a part on ‘Theoretical Perspectives’. The contribution by Wim van Binsbergen and Frans Wiggermann is rather unique in that it combines the insights of the anthropologist with the erudition of the Assyriologist. The result is a rich and thought-provoking article on the meaning and development of magic in Mesopotamia. Nick Veldhuis (Groningen) looks at the poetry of magic in an effort to see how words do the work they are supposed to do. Mark Geller has explored the psychological experience that lies buried underneath the surface level of exorcistic texts. Marten Stol (Amsterdam) takes a slightly different approach in an article that tries to assess the psychosomatic nature of the suffering
that magic is designed to combat. JnAnn Scurlock (Chicago) takes up the issue of the distinction between the various specialists of exorcism; although the question is familiar, Scurlock’s approach shows that we must reexamine the question.

The second part, entitled ‘Surveys and Studies’, opens with a discussion by Tzvi Abusch of Mesopotamian ideas about ‘Witchcraft and the Anger of the Personal God’. He argues that the conjunction of the two supernatural forces is due to the increasing importance of witchcraft beliefs in Mesopotamia and theorizes about socio-religious developments that might explain various features and trends discernible in Mesopotamian magical thought and ritual. His essay thus serves as a bridge between the theoretical and material sections. There follows an examination of the Nāmarūbi texts by Stefan Mau (Heidelberg). In a succinct and lucid manner, he presents his understanding of the nature and significance of the complex body of material. Alasdair Livingstone (Birmingham) presents a survey of the hermeneutical tradition in Mesopotamia. The contribution by Karl van der Toorn explores the setting of domestic magic on the basis of a new close reading of Old Babylonian baby incantations. Eva Braun-Holzinger (Frankfurt) surveys the evidence for appropriate figures at Mesopotamian temples, and suggests correspondences between archaeological remains and textual descriptions. Shahla Shaked and Christa Müller-Kessler (Einskirchen), finally, take the reader beyond the confines of Assyriology. Shaked looks at the poetics of Aramaic spells from Late Antiquity, and Müller-Kessler compares Mandaic incantations on lead rolls with the incantations on bowls. Apart from their value as introductions to texts that are unfamiliar to many Assyriologists, the two contributions demonstrate certain continuities between early Mesopotamian magic and Mesopotamian magic in late Antiquity.

The third part of the book is devoted to the presentation and discussion of new texts. Irving Finkel (London) offers a large number of new dog, snake and scorpion incantations; Antoine Cavigliaux (Geneva) publishes important new texts from Tel Haddad, and discusses their significance; William W. Hallo (New Haven) publishes two Old Babylonian texts and a Neo-Babylonian one from the Babylonian collections at Yale; and Wilfred G. Lambert (Birmingham) gives an update on his work on ‘Marduk’s Address to the Demons’, a text that can now be reconstructed almost in its entirety. The editorial work has been greatly facilitated thanks to Aernol van Goolga (Leiden) and Frans van Koppen (Leiden), who prepared a final version of the book on computer, to Kathryn Kravitz (Waltham), who helped edit the original submissions, and to Chris Wyckoff (Waltham), who read the volume in proof and prepared the index.

The editors look upon this collection of studies as a means to let other people share in the excitement of the MATAS conference on magic, and – indirectly – in the work of the theme group on magic and religion. We trust that this book will serve its purpose as an introduction to the interpretation of Mesopotamian magic.

Tzvi Abusch
Karel van der Toorn
Waltham and Leiden, July 1997

Abbreviations

A tablets in the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago
AA tablets from Mari in the collections of the Aleppo Museum
AA American Anthropologist
AAAS Annales archeologiques (arabe) syriennes (Damascus)
AAR American Academy of Religion
AASOR Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research
AB tablets in the Bodleian Collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
AB Anchor Bible
ABB Althbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung (Leiden)
ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary
ABRT I.A. Craig, Assyrian and Babylonian Religious Texts (2 vols., Leipzig 1895–1897)
here described as his vizier. With an all-powerful Marsuk a discussion on equal terms with his father would be demeaning, so Nabû replaces Enki. But the similarity is not a coincidence. But, as explained above, no description of demonic activity is given in this text, so the conclusion is forced upon us that the compiler has inserted at this point some lines from the middle of a post-Old Babylonian Akkadian incantation. However, the long and carefully constructed ša ša section, though paralleled in shorter such listings in bilingual incantations, is clearly an original construction of meriti.

So while sections (b) and (c) are highly original as literary compositions, one is left with the problem that the composite nature of the whole is less successful as literature. Nothing fundamentally new is offered for exorcism: it is assumed that demons and shades of the dead exist and trouble the living, and that Marsuk with the help of other gods in sections (d) and (e) can overcome them. However, the Sitz im Leben is the outstanding question. No doubt the author/compiler had some specific purpose in view when he composed this text. Its 260 lines were too formidable for recitation whenever demoniacal activity required the services of an exorcist. Also appearing of Marsuk in person within the major part of the text surely presumes a very special occasion. But here there is no shred of evidence to suggest an answer. No rubric gives instructions on when and how to perform the text. Of course, even if we knew what the author/compiler intended, that would not necessarily give us the truth. The author/compiler may have had a particularly important occasion in mind, but others may have prevented its being so used, and it might have been employed on occasions to which its content was not especially suited. One can only hope that future discoveries will give us at least some information of this kind.

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5 See W.G. Lambert, AFO 17 (1954b), 310.
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