Deities, Demons, and Monsters in Mesopotamia

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The Mesopotamian world was an enchanted one, full of deities, demons, and monstrous creatures. Most deities occupied the heavens, though worship of them was centered in particular cities. Demons inhabited the Netherworld, which lay both beyond and below the earth, while monsters were often located at the margins of the civilized world.

The range and scope of deities in Mesopotamia was impressive. The pantheon contained hundreds of gods and goddesses ranging from those who were worshipped throughout Mesopotamia to lower-ranking deities such as one’s personal god, who could intercede on an individual’s behalf with the greater and more powerful deities. God lists—tablets recording the names and various epithets of deities—date primarily to the second millennium bc and later (Figure 4.2).

The Mesopotamian pantheon changed and shifted over the course of its history. Stretching roughly three thousand years, from the early third millennium bc to the latter half of the first millennium bc, these changes were often, though not always, gradual shifts in the position and rank of certain deities. More minor deities could temporarily rise to prominence or fade from view entirely, but many of the more prominent deities remained in some position of power throughout Mesopotamian history (Black and Green 1992). This included the gods Anu, the sky god and earliest head of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and Enlil, who became head of the pantheon after him. Deities acquired new names and lost old ones, which was to some extent the result of changes in the languages primarily used in Mesopotamia. Deities were often first known under Sumerian names. With the increasing influence of Akkadian, they acquired new characteristics and names—the Sumerian god Enki, for instance, was associated with the Akkadian god Ea. Yet even though Sumerian, the oldest written language, had died out as a spoken language by the early second millennium bc, it was still used in literary and religious contexts, ensuring that many Sumerian divine names remained in use well into the first millennium bc.

Other deities were more closely connected to certain attributes or presided over particular concepts, whether abstract or concrete. Thus, the deity Enki (Ea) was the god of wisdom and magic and was often seen as a trickster figure, and the god Ishkur (Adad) was known as the god of storms. Deities were occasionally also in charge of multiple areas. The god Utu (Shamash), for example, was both the sun god, the god of law and justice, and one of the gods connected to divination.
As he observed everything on his path through the sky during the day, he was best informed to decide legal cases and the outcome of divination inquiries. Other gods, such as Ninurta, were primarily known as warrior figures. They were protagonists of literary compositions that highlighted their martial qualities, as in the *Epic of Anzu*, which describes a combat between Ninurta and the chaotic and monstrous bird Anzu.

Mesopotamian goddesses often held positions of secondary importance when compared with their divine husbands, but they could also wield considerable power. By far the most prominent female deity in Mesopotamia was the goddess Inana (Ishtar), who was connected to later deities such as the Syrian goddess Astarte, or the biblical Asheroth. A complex deity, Ishtar was the goddess of both love and war, and she is featured in these capacities in several Sumerian devotional and literary compositions (Figure 4.3). She was far more important than her spouse, the god Dumuzi. As a celestial deity, she featured as Venus, the morning star. Ishtar’s sister, Ereshkigal, the ruler of the Netherworld, was also more significant than her husband, Nergal, the god of plague. The goddess Gula was closely linked to healing and known as *bêlet balâtî*, the “Lady of Health.” The goddess Nisaba, another independently powerful member of the pantheon, was the deity of both grain and writing. While Gula maintained both her independence and relative prominence throughout Mesopotamian history, Nisaba did not: her function as the scribal goddess was taken over in the first millennium BC by the male god Nabu, the son of Marduk. Other goddesses were primarily defined by their connections to their spouses, such as Ninlil, the wife of Enlil, and Zarpanitum, the consort of Marduk. In textual sources, these goddesses rarely appear outside of paired references with these spouses, although they could, and did, have their own shrines dedicated to their worship.

From the third millennium BC onward, Mesopotamian deities were tightly connected to particular cities, which served as the location of the god’s central cult and most important temple. The god Enlil, for example, was worshiped in the city of Nippur, which also served as the location of his temple, the Ekur. Similarly, the city of Uruk was the home of Enki and his cult. The goddess Inana, perpetually an exception, had at least seven patron cities, though her primary city was Uruk. In the Sumerian story of her “Descent to the Netherworld,” these cities are invoked (lines 7–13; Figure 4.4):
She abandoned the Eanna-temple) in Uruk,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the Emushkalama in Bad-tibira,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the Giguna in Zabalam,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the Eshara in Adab,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the Baradurgara in Nippur,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the Hursagkalama in Kish,
and descended to the Netherworld.  
She abandoned the E'ulmash in Agade,
and descended to the Netherworld.

This close link between a city and a deity meant
that the rise or fall of a particular city often had important theological repercussions. Marduk, the patron god

of the city of Babylon, for instance, used to hold a relatively minor position within the pantheon up to the early to mid second millennium BC. Babylon’s ascension under Hammurabi eventually also triggered a rise in the deity’s prominence. Marduk came to replace Enlil as head of the pantheon, and his new lofty position was both celebrated and explained by the creation epic known as Enuma Elish, or “When on High” (Figure 4.5). Composed in the late second millennium BC, this text describes Marduk’s defeat of the monstrous Tiamat, mother of all the gods, and his creation of the world from her slain corpse: “He split her (Tiamat) in two like a dried fish; one half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens” (Lambert 2013: tablet IV, 137–138). In the end, the gods make Marduk their king. Marduk did not maintain this position of supremacy indefinitely, however. When the Assyrian Empire rose to
prominence in the first millennium BC, he faced competition from Assur, chief god of the northern Mesopotamian city that bore his name, and also from his own son, Nabu.

The worship of deities was multifaceted. Although a deity’s most important temple would be located in their cult city, additional temples and shrines could also be found in other cities. For the more important deities in the pantheon, the main temple could be a massive structure. It was the focus of the official, state-sanctioned and state-sponsored cult, but normally not accessible to the general population. Unlike the massive churches and cathedrals of medieval Europe, Mesopotamian temples were not intended for public worship, but were instead walled off and self-contained. They were served by a hierarchy of priests and other cultic officials, owned their own land, and played an important role in the local economy and often also in the surrounding region. A temple was conceived as the home of the deity, a position that could be reflected in its name: the sanctuary of the sun god Shamash in the city of Sippar, for example, was known as the Ebaabbâr, or "Shining House."

The deity inhabiting the temple was embodied in his or her statue, which was housed in the innermost sanctum of the temple. The statue was often lavishly adorned with precious materials (ensuring that few have survived to the present day) and would be washed and clothed and presented with daily offerings of food (Figure 4.6). In case a statue was damaged beyond repair or fell out of use, it was not discarded but buried. If a cultic statue or a temple complex required renovation, the deity had to be ritually reinvited and welcomed back into his or her home. This was a delicate affair, with the ever-present concern that if gods or goddesses did not agree with the improvements, they might reject the temple as well as the entire city. Otherwise, the deity’s image rarely left the temple, except for specific feast or festival days when their statue would be ceremonially processed throughout the city, “visiting” other temples and their respective gods, as well as providing the general public with a rare glimpse of the god.

Because of their monumental character, temples, along with palaces, have often been the focus of archaeological excavations, and they also feature prominently in the textual sources. We have less information on the worship of deities in private households. It seems that religious practices in the private sphere were centered on smaller-scale, personal deities, who would directly aid the worshipper. Personal deities required dedicated worship and careful handling as well. If individuals were beset by an inexplicable turn of illness or misfortune, they might wonder if their personal god had grown angry and deserted them. This terrible fate could only be rectified through the careful application of ritual incantations meant to appease and soothe the heart of one’s personal god and so restore divine protection (Figure 4.7). The wide range of potential supernatural threats meant that the protection of
A personal god was vital for the people of ancient Mesopotamia to go safely through everyday life.

In addition to taking on a wide range of roles and functions, Mesopotamian deities could appear in a variety of different representations and depictions. Often, deities were represented in anthropomorphic form—that is, human-shaped. They possessed visible signs of divinity, such as a horned headdress or emanating rays (the latter can often be seen in representations of the goddess Ishtar in the first millennium; Figure 4.8). Some texts (such as the “god description” text VAT 15606+, col. vi 24–36; see Wagensonner 2009, 46) describe the appearance of divine beings in some detail:

The head is the head of a bird, wiry(?) hair fell down from her head on her back. 
Her hands are human;  
In both of her (hands) she holds a censer. 
On (her) right and left side she is adorned with wings, which hang downward. 
Her body is female; 
the garment is made of fine linen; 
The body of her feet is that of a bird. 
Her feet stand in the ḫunu-position(?) . Her name is Tiruru.

Deities were also represented by divine emblems or symbols. Ishtar was shown in symbolic form by a star or rosette, and her attribute was a lion. The healing goddess Gula was represented by a crouching dog (whose saliva was thought to cure wounds). The attribute of the god Marduk was a spade. The god Ishkur (Adad) could be represented by a bull crowned with a lightning fork (Ornan 2005; Figure 4.9). Astral deities had more obvious representations: the moon god Sin was symbolized as a crescent moon, and the sun god Shamash, predictably enough, as a sun with emanating rays.

More often than not, the members of the Mesopotamian pantheon were content to ignore the more mundane and mortal inhabitants of Mesopotamia, unless specifically moved to do otherwise. Prayers and offerings could sway the gods to intercede or offer assistance on someone’s behalf.

Deities were only one side of the Mesopotamian universe of supernatural beings. The supernatural world was also populated by more dangerous and chaotic creatures: monsters, who mostly interacted with gods and heroes, and demons who were inclined toward acts of malevolence against human beings and thus posed a considerable threat to a person’s continued well-being and even society as a whole (Sonik 2013). Although there were individual and unique demonic creatures in Mesopotamia, demons could also embody more abstract concepts.
The place of demons was a natural outgrowth of the way in which Mesopotamian society perceived and structured its world. The safest and most central places in Mesopotamia were the cities, seen as the bastion of civilization and protected by large encircling city walls. The farther one moved from the city, the wilder and more dangerous the world became. Beyond the city and its walls was the agricultural expanse of cultivated fields, threaded through with an extensive network of irrigation canals, an area that eventually gave way to pasture and grazing land. This countryside was the edge of the settled world, and beyond it lay the steppe (known as e d e n in Sumerian or šērū in Akkadian). The steppe was dangerous and wild, a proper home for threatening animals, as well as demons and monsters.

Past the steppe lay the wilder foothills, and beyond them, the mountains, called kūr in Sumerian. The Zagros mountain range to the north and east of Mesopotamia was an inherently foreign environment and a distinct natural barrier between southern Mesopotamia and neighboring lands. These alien qualities led the mountains to represent not only an
untamed and dangerous wilderness, and alien countries, but also act as a doorway to the Netherworld, or serve as its location outright. The Netherworld—likewise called k u r—was geographically opposed to the skies and the heavens where the gods lived, and thus the location that served as the home of the dead and the point of origin for a wide range of demonic beings.

Demons in Mesopotamia came in a variety of forms and served several different functions. The general word for demon in Sumerian, u d u g , could indicate a collective group of demonic figures or a specific demon. It is the closest we come to a general, nonspecific demonic figure, and the u d u g -demon is most often described by what it is not: it has no family, no spouse, no children, and no home, and its name is not known in either the heavens or the earth. Other demons fall into more specific categories: as the embodiments of some disease, wandering souls or ghosts haunting the living, bestial or monstrous creatures, the manifestation of particular dangerous locations, and even the embodiment of specific times of day or of the year (Wiggermann 2011). The people of Mesopotamia also felt threatened by the figure of the witch. Though imagined and personified as a female figure, the witch was also chaotic and demonic in nature and capable of threatening the very fabric of civilization (Abusch 1989). Her ability to magically affect the world around her was seen as inherently transgressive, as she co-opted powers that would otherwise belong to the realm of the divine.

All these threats required a particularly skilled opponent. In Mesopotamia, supernatural agents were countered by the figure of the ašīpu, the ritual healer or exorcist. This individual was a trained and skilled professional who used a combination of medico-magical means to treat the illnesses afflicting his patients. His methods were specifically geared toward attacking demons, witchcraft, or any other supernatural threat that was thought to be the cause of a particular illness, rather than merely coping with the symptoms. These methods centered on incantations that often included the identification of the threat, a plea to Enki and Asalluh, the deities most concerned with protective or benevolent magic, and a series of divinely transmitted ritual instructions for the exorcist to complete. It was imperative that the ašīpu’s magical abilities be sanctioned by the gods, both for his own protection and to reafirm his place within the ordered Mesopotamian universe. Unlike the witch, he acted with explicit divine support. The ašīpu was also able to call on the protection of his personal deity and could rely on aid from a range of benevolently inclined supernatural figures, commonly referred to as the “good u d u g ” and “good I a m a .” These positive figures could even be set against their malevolent counterparts, highlighting the inherently malleable nature of such figures.

Incantations and rituals could vary in aim and intent, targeting general or specific threats. The witch, for example, was countered through a long and detailed ritual incantation series known as Maqāli, or “Burning,” which ensured not only that her evil would be pacified, but that she herself would be destroyed, her body and spirit burned and carried up to the heavens like smoke, for the gods to deal with (Abusch 2015). Unlike other demons, the witch could not be cast back to the Netherworld, out of fear that she would still be capable of causing harm. Other ritual incantations were designed to counter a wide range of demons and the potential threats they could pose. Many of them were collected in an incantation series known as Uduq-hul, “Evil Demons” (Figure 4.10). This detailed series, which consisted of sixteen tablets in its first millennium BC version, countered a range of threats (Geller 2016). Sections often ended with long lists of demons that would be repelled, including the conveniently named demon mimma lemmu (“anything evil”).

There were exceptions to the vague and amorphous nature that characterized many Mesopotamian
demons. The demoness Lamashu had a clearly defined identity, set attributes, and physical characteristics. Though her traits changed somewhat over her long history, with attestations of Lamashu spread over the broad geographic expanse of Mesopotamia from the second millennium onward, they are generally consistent. She is often seen in striding profile, with clawed or taloned feet and a lion’s head. Her clawed fingers grasp snakes, while a piglet and dog or puppy nurse at her pendulous breasts. Originally a goddess—her name is still written with the divine determinative—Lamashu’s predilection for killing and eating infants
caused her father, the sky god Anu, to expel her from heaven. No longer the recipient of worship or prayers, her antagonistic behaviors only increased.

As with any premodern society, death during pregnancy or in childbirth was not uncommon in Mesopotamia, which also had a high rate of infant mortality. Lamassu embodied these dangers. She trailed after pregnant women and attacked infants. Incantations designed to combat her clearly describe the threat she posed: "[Lamassu] follows behind the women about to give birth. She counts their months, marks their days on the wall: 'Bring me your sons—I want to suckle (them)! In the mouth of your daughters I want to place (my) breast.' She holds in her hand fever, cold, chills ... she slithers into a locked house and strangles the youth" (Farber 2014, 157).

This text is part of a long series of incantations standardized in the first millennium BC that countered Lamassu and the threat she posed. In many ways, Lamassu represented the inversion of the concept of motherhood: though she desired to nurse infants, her milk was poison, and the "children" she was shown nursing were instead wild beasts.

Incantations against Lamassu could also be written on individual tablets, some of which were found within private dwellings—for example, at the early second millennium BC Anatolian site of Kültepe (Figure 4.11). Other objects that promised protection from the demon were plaques designed to be hung from the walls inside a house, presumably in close proximity to the potential victim, and smaller amulets featuring concise incantations and depictions of Lamassu.
texts identify him as “the son of Hanbu, king of the evil wind demons” (Frahm 2018a). Pazuzu remains one of the few Mesopotamian supernatural beings to have transitioned into modern popular culture, thanks to his appearance in the 1971 novel The Exorcist and the subsequent 1973 film adaptation, where he possesses a 12-year-old girl. Such actions were actually not in character with Pazuzu, as he served primarily in a protective role in Mesopotamia, by opposing Lamashu. Plaques feature him driving Lamashu away from the city and into the marshes and, eventually, the Netherworld (Wiggermann 2000, 243–245). Images of Pazuzu spread widely throughout Mesopotamia and were also found farther west, with potential iconographic connections to the Egyptian god Bes.

In contrast to demons, who could move from the mountains and steppe to threaten the inhabitants of Mesopotamian cities, monsters were often attached to one particular geographic location and rarely found outside its vicinity. Like demons, monsters were often represented as hybrid creatures, with both human and animal qualities, or as an assemblage of several different animals, like the chimera of later Greek myth. Generally speaking, monsters were found far outside the city, in regions such as the steppe. The mushusšu, for example, a kind of dragon portrayed as a snake with lion-like forelegs and hind legs reminiscent of the talons of an eagle, was considered an inhabitant of the steppe, where the creature allegedly lived alongside more mundane though still dangerous beasts such as lions.

The most prominent monster was Humbaba, who plays an important role in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the most famous literary work from Mesopotamia (Figure 4.14).

In this text, the hero king Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu journey to the land of the Cedar Forest to claim its trees. Campaigns to gather raw materials such as trees for the construction of temples and palaces were expected of kings, as Mesopotamia lacked forests with timber suited for such large-scale construction projects. Located in modern Lebanon, the Cedar Forest of the Epic of Gilgamesh is greatly reduced today, though what remains (known as the Forest of the Cedars of God, or Horsh Arz el-Rab) is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Within the text, Humbaba is described from the outset as a terrifying being: “his voice is the deluge, his speech is fire and his breath is death” (George 2003, 198–199; Old Babylonian version “Yale” tablet III, lines 110–111). Protected by his me-lamī or melammu, a terrifying brilliance most often associated with deities, Humbaba made a fearsome opponent for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, though they were eventually triumphant.
over him. As Humbaba was the divinely appointed protector of the Cedar Forest, placed there by the god Enlil himself, this victory earned the two heroes the ire and condemnation of the gods, and Enkidu eventually paid for their transgressive acts with his life. As for Humbaba, his fierce gaze and protective qualities were repurposed in Mesopotamia, with terracotta masks of his face found in a variety of contexts as early as the Old Babylonian period (Figure 4.15).

Monsters and demons were inherently liminal creatures, set forever at the periphery. They haunted the steppe, or were found in the distant mountains. These qualities allowed them to move, quite literally, beyond the borders of Mesopotamia itself, travelling far and wide. Humbaba in particular moved westward, appearing in Levantine and Greco-Roman contexts. As he migrated, he was adapted by the new cultures that used his distinctive iconography and became a model for well-known figures such as the Gorgon Medusa of Greek mythology. Certain representations of Medusa’s head, known as Gorgoneions, even featured beards, which was a particularly distinctive feature of Humbaba (Graff 2012, 162–164). These Gorgoneions could also be used for protective purposes. Humbaba’s fierce gaze is but one example of many that illustrate how Mesopotamian demons and deities, their visual representations, and the stories told about them could outlive cuneiform culture and were adapted by other civilizations, especially in the Levant and the Mediterranean.
Works Cited


