

REVIEW

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Akkadian Magic Literature, Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations: Corpus–Context–Praxis.

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An anthology of incantation texts from early phases of Mesopotamian magic represents a significant milestone in charting the ways in which ancient societies dealt with anxieties associated with disease, contact with animals (snakes, scorpions, dogs, pests), witchcraft (including love charms), and demons. The introduction provides an innovative view, such as the distinction between incantation tablets in portrait vs. landscape or single vs. multi-column formats, possibly indicating whether tablets belonged to private or public archives. Apart from the descriptions of incantations and their applications, the introduction offers a brief but rich discussion of literary devices (pp. 50–61), which is a novel approach to the genre of magic, particularly because incantations are not usually included within general studies of *belles lettres* within Assyriology.

Having this useful collection of texts in a single volume offers opportunities for further speculation regarding this brand of magic, which is not always representative of the entire genre. These texts are mostly in Akkadian, with some fragments of Sumerian and hardly any bilingual texts, and even more striking is the fact that few of these texts have duplicate copies (e.g. No. 18, 19), or colophons. The Sumerian incantations from this same period on which Falkenstein based his oft-cited 1931 dissertation, *Haupttypen der sumerischen Beschwörung*, have little in common with the Akkadian incantations of the present study. Most of the formal features of Sumerian incantations are lacking, such as the divine consultation between the gods Enki and Asalluhi (or in Akkadian as Ea and Marduk), only represented in the present corpus in bilingual texts (e.g. No. 10, 16), although the two gods are admittedly mentioned *en passant* throughout. The formulaic list of demons and ghosts of Udug-hul incantations are also missing, as well as the fuller descriptions of the cosmos in which gods and demons reside. This comparison shows the true nature of these mostly Akkadian incantations as representing the folk magic of their era, rather than the formal literary tradition of the Sumerian incantations which were translated into canonical bilingual editions and eventually even transliterated into Greek. The majority of these Akkadian translations did not pass the test of time, i.e. were not copied, studied, and used in the following millennium. This is not to argue that these representatives of Akkadian folk magic have no literary value, but that their role as reference works or even practical applications of magic appears to have been relatively ephemeral.

In cases where motifs from the Old Babylonian period survive into later phases of Mesopotamian magic, comparisons render some surprising results. One interesting example presents itself in incantations for gastrointestinal problems, particularly the “heart-plant” motif (see pp. 103–4), best exemplified by text §35 (YOS 11, 11), which begins:

^dUTU *ša-am-ma-am iš-tu H[UR.SAG] ú-še₂₀-bi-ra-am*
ŠÀ ^dUTU *mu še₂₀-bi-ri-šu iš-ba-at*
ŠÀ ^dNANNA *i-na ša-me-e iš-ba-at*

ŠÀ GU₄ *i-na su-pu-ri-i[m] iṣ-ba-at*
 ŠÀ UDU *i-na ta-ar-ba-ṣi-im iṣ-ba-at*

Šamaš brought the plant from over the mountain
 (but) it seized the heart (stomach) of Šamaš (the sun) who had brought it over,
 it seized the stomach of Šin (the moon) in heaven,
 it seized the stomach of the ox in the pen,
 it seized the stomach of the sheep in the fold.

The internal anatomy of the victims was being attacked by the *šammu*, which in this context appears to be a poisonous rather than a therapeutic plant. What seems clear is that the good intentions of Šamaš went badly wrong, as one text explains (No. 19 = CUSAS 32, 8i), [*ša-am-m*]u-um *ša li-i[b-bi-im šu-sú]-um da-ma-aq-[šu]*, “the plant of the heart (stomach), its benefit (seemed) fitting”; but the plant then attacked the unfortunate Šamaš who plucked it. This role of Šamaš contrasts with later instructions regarding medicinal plants, that “you uproot it before the sun has noticed” (see BAM 1 l. 7, *ZI-ka IGI NU IGI.DU_{8-a}*, A. Attia and G. Buisson, *Journal des Médecines cunéiformes* 19, 2012: 26), or even that the sun or moon has not yet seen it.

First millennium resonances of this same motif can be found in the anti-witchcraft corpus, but with much more positive results, such as the report of the *rapādu*-plant (T. Abusch and D. Schwemer, *Corpus of Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* [AMD 8/2] 101):

ÉN *ina muh-hi KUR-i iz-za-az-zu* ^rdUTU¹ *i-dag-gal ṣi-it šam-mu ka-la-mu ina naš-šú* ^rKI-tim¹ ^ura-pa-du *i-za-ak-ka-ru ana te-lit* ^d15

Incantation. Šamaš is present over the mountain (and) sees the emergence of all plants in the earth’s dew, (and) he mentions the *rapādu*-plant to the very competent Ištar.

This turns out to be a useful plant, which Ištar can use to calm the nerves of an angry woman.

This motif has an even more distant comparison with a Mandaic incantation known as the “Phylactery for Rue” (E.S. Drower, *Orientalia* NS 15, 1946, 324–6). The incantation is addressed to the *šambra*-plant, usually translated as ‘rue’ but corresponding to Akkadian *šibburatu*. The incantation is addressed to *šambra br ʔura*, “*šambra*, child of the mountain”, confirming that *šamiš u-sira l-dilak nihun mrabiana*, “sun and moon are they who raised you”. The results in this case are positive, as the text explains, *anat hu šambra gaia kḏ ḏ-šailak u-baiilak alahia zikria u-estirata nuqbata l-asutak*, “you are the proud *šambra*, when the male gods and the female goddesses ask and request of you your healing” (= Akkadian *asūtu*). Unlike in the OB incantation No. 35 (cited above), instead of “seizing” the stomach, the *šambra* protects against the *ruḥa*-demon which resides upon all internal organs: ‘recite these commands of the *šambra* and give (it) to drink to one whom the demon has seized’ (*qrinun l-halin pugdama ḏ-šambra u-ašqa l-man ḏ-ruha l-ḡiṭatlh*). A new edition of the Phylactery for Rue is being prepared by Bogdan Burtea, Stefanie Rudolf, and the present reviewer.

Such comparisons between this corpus and later magical texts can be enlightening and productive, although the authors have unfortunately not sufficiently facilitated this process. The book’s meagre indices are a missed opportunity for study of the vocabulary (and grammar) of these older magical texts, since one would

have preferred to consult a glossary like that found in N. Heeßel's *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik* (2000). Nevertheless, this book offers a treasure-trove of important texts for future study of Akkadian magic, including the 47 texts drawn from Andrew George's 2016 publication, *Mesopotamian Incantations and Related Texts in the Schoyen Collection* (CUSAS 32).

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