

Sorcery texts from Ancient Mesopotamia by Amar Annus Bibliotheca Antiqua.
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tu-ur-rat amât-sa ana pî-šá lišân-šá qa-
in elî kiš-pi-šá lim-ha-su-ši ilimeš mu-ši ti

The spell of the sorceress is hateful;
let her word come back in her mouth,
let as-rat her tongue be tied!

Let the Gods of the Night overcome her spell! (<http://www.rosscaldwell.com/babylonian/MAQLURIT.pdf>)

Considering academic interest and the number of academic books published annually on the subject of witchcraft/witches, the translation into Estonian of Mesopotamian incantations is not exactly surprising, but unique nonetheless. Unlike the works referred to above, half of the volume of the publication in the Antiqua series is designated for famous original text, texts inhibiting the actualisation of witchcraft. Namely, the publication on the Mesopotamian incantation ceremony “Burning” with translations of a complete ceremony of roughly a hundred incantations and two curse texts contains relevant commentary and a longer essay on the topic written by Amar Annus.

The last century has been a success story for researchers of ancient history as evidenced by archaeological findings and the number of academic studies, but text corpora as well as translations of original texts made available online also serve as a guide to ancient culture. New opportunities for restoring texts – a large part of clay tablets has been found in fragments – and a general increase in awareness about cuneiform writing and the societies that used it has led to new publications employing textual criticism in addition to what has been published before. The ever-growing online sharing of Mesopotamian texts, translations and commentaries is also a gratifying source of information and gives cause to assume that the knowledge base of modern readers goes deeper than the Code of Hammurabi and the flood story in Gilgamesh. Although there have been no geographical restrictions on academic research over the last decades, scholars can work in every corner of the world and the number of public databases has increased, we still must admit that the bases for funding research are nefariously restrictive and do not favour in-depth research. For example, the funding period for “The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL)” founded by the Faculty of Oriental studies at Oxford University lasted from 1997 to 2006, after which further funding was found for software updates in 2015. This text corpus contains Sumerian literature in all its forms, meaning that

it includes poetry, hymns, letters, songs, writing exercises, older mythological compositions and dialogues, examples of proverbs, riddles, etc. The project site provides access to four hundred Mesopotamian texts (with translations) which illustrate compositions from the third and second millennia BCE. A team of excellent researchers including Graham Cunningham, Eleanor Robson, Gabor Zolyomi, Miguel Civil, Bendt Alster, Joachim Krecher, Piotr Michalowski *et al.* have published shared approaches and separate academic writings, incl. on the subject of incantations. The database referred to above could be used as compulsory reading for students in humanities (especially folkloristics and literature). Preferably with references to additional literature. By now, there are also a number of environments providing generalised information (e.g. the site <https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Miscellaneous%20Babylonian%20Inscriptions> and many other sites are helpful in finding answers to various questions).

The compilers of ETCSL state that predictions, omens and a large body of incantation texts are not within their scope. According to various assessments, the number of texts related to omens and divination account for up to thirty per cent or more of all preserved texts. Predictions contain several practices still used today: divination based on animal organs, divination based on signs of nature and in the sky, dream interpretation, astrological omens, etc. as well as teachings on diagnostics.

The instructions in the writings indicate that the people were able to generalise processes and the phenomena relate thereto, making it easier to understand the achievements of Greek and other subsequent cultures and their connections with Babylonian and Egyptian cultures. The divination practices listed above were used until quite recently or are still used today and continue to be passed on in verbal tradition in many cultures. Sumerian texts also bear ontological importance – in order to explain human psychology and cognitive abilities, the stability of religious fantasies, the dialogue nature and variability of written and verbal ritual and text and many other issues still relevant in this day and age.

In addition to incantations, herbal therapy served an important role in healing. Texts of verbal charms and incantations from the period 2600-100 BCE can be found in writings, literary texts and other sources in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, where they appear alongside personal life occurrences entwined with symptoms of illnesses, etiologies and diagnoses. There are also instructions on what to do in the event of suffering or upon becoming a victim of evil.

The form of the text has been perfected over millennia and the cycle “Burning” is considered to be the best example of this. Graham Cunningham’s incantation studies open up a world of verbal charms where incantations against

sorcerers and sorcery also make room for texts against curses, the repelling of bad omens, exorcism of demons, charms for silencing snakes and evil dogs, sauna and cleansing ceremony incantations, love charms for increasing potency, etc. As is characteristic of the geographical location, there are many incantations against agricultural pests, incl. locusts. The incantations are a reflection of the society where they were used and the environment in which the people involved in the culture lived.

Prayers and incantations belonging to therapies and healing rituals were either performed by the person himself/herself or he/she used the help of a professional incantator, e.g. when performing Maqlû. Maqlû was discovered during the height of archaeological studies in the Middle East in the 19th century. Anyone interested can find the original text along with its English translation on the Internet, but it is also possible to look up its core translations. *Knut L. Tallqvist's translation was published as early as 1895, Gerhard Meier's translation was published in 1937* and the most recent academic edition of the Maqlû was published in 2015. The last edition was put together by Tzvi Abusch, professor of Assyriology and Ancient Middle Eastern Religion at Harvard University and his "The Magical Ceremony Maqlû: A Critical Edition", Leiden: Brill is also the basis of Amar Annus' translation.

Maqlû tablets and the fragments thereof are preserved in numerous museums across Europe and America: in the British Museum, Berlin, Chicago, Pennsylvania, Oxford, Istanbul, etc., making it incredibly cumbersome to restore the text. In his treatment of the subject matter, Tzvi Abusch considers it important that the definitions of Mesopotamian magic and sorcery differ from biblical literature and several subsequent approaches. According to him, magic was a legitimate part of religion, corresponding to "the human needs, crises and wishes of individuals and the king". Sorcery in Mesopotamian context (*kišpû, ruḥû, rusû, upšāšû lemnûtu*) was not related to magical behaviour but hostile conduct, i.e. it was related to practices that served an anti-social and destructive purpose.

Maqlû incantations include instructions for the appropriate performance of the ritual. Incantations were originally performed during a single night in July or August – this was seen as a particularly dangerous time when spirits from the netherworld made people vulnerable to their sorcery. The ritual lasted from sunset to sunrise and began by burning figurines of sorcerers, drowning the figurines in black liquid, placing them face down on the ground and crushing them while reciting the texts on the first four clay tablets. Descriptions of this ritual and other rituals reveal the relationships between ceremonial practices and texts. Remarkably, many of the techniques from back then have parallels

in contemporary societies, starting from the practice of drawing a circle around the sick person.

The most renowned medical researchers of ancient Mesopotamia, including Markham Gelleri and Zack Kotzé, believe that the Maqlû ceremony was used for treating paranoid schizophrenia, although at that time the development of the condition was explained with the evil eye, bewitching and sorcery. Which brings us to an important part of the publication. The translator's tale of sorcery, facts, liberal parallels drawn with the traditions of the Livonians (the situation in the 1920s, based on the collection of texts by Oskar Loorits) and other arbitrary examples presented in the beautiful linguistic interpretation of Amar Annus. The placement of acts of sorcery in the territory of Livonian in the beginning of the 20th century, and the Komi people, in the beginning of the 21st century, somewhere in the vast fields of Russia, is reminiscent of the Viking tradition. Vikings placed one-eyed giants, dragons and other supernatural creatures on the Eastern Route – we do not have any, but they still dwell in the wilderness of the fringe areas. This explains the use of Art Leete's articles from the daily paper *Postimees* as sources, although similar servicing texts of sorcerers can be found in Estonian journals or advertisements in central Tartu – the person writing them has decided to position real sorcery further away in time and space.

If we exclude unexpectedly common references to autism, then it is a matter of taste whether the phenomenon of the evil eye should be explained by hyper-mentalism or whether we should stick with the explanations provided by psychologists and researchers of social relationships. The influence of ethnic explanations on the course of the illness and the sick person is an important aspect. At the initiative of Arthur Kleinmann and other researchers of ethno-psychiatric phenomena and due to the influence of popular cultural etiologies, they have found a place in the international nomenclature of the World Health Organisation (WHO) as ethno-psychiatric diagnoses which should be taken into account in ethnic communities.

The foreword in its current form is a separate (artistic) work and everyone is free to select an explanation on facts and the interpretation thereof. For example, in his descriptions of witch trials Annus rationalises and marginalises them, although the litigations were conducted in accordance with legal practices supported by contemporary mundane and religious authorities. The foreword repeatedly makes irritating references to the sempiternity of modern problems, not to mention magical practices. The source of the illness and sick persons are still constrained by drawing a circle around them. The practice of using a plough to draw a protective circle around villages facing the danger of a pandemic as was once customary in the heart of Europe is still very much alive as are many other practices. This indicates that magical thought and behaviour cannot be

easily rationalised and that old structural methods apply across different eras. During his lifetime, Plato admired the healing abilities of Greek incantations and the power of word over the body and mind of people. He found the texts at the time to be poetical and beautiful, which is undoubtedly also true of the Maqlû and Mesopotamian incantations that were perfected over millennia.

The conclusion made from the above is that we could use reading books, textbooks, academic anthologies and academic monographs about sorcery texts as well as about the variegated Mesopotamian literary tradition as such, regardless of the order of publication of such works. Scholars specialised on more particular fields have no issue with finding originals, translations and commentaries for their own personal use, but only Assyriologists could help clarify the broader cultural context, intellectual aspects and development of different categories of texts.

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