

Mediation in the Mesopotamian Religio-magical Worldview

Introduction: Since the onset of the modern analysis of magic in ancient societies the general inclination has been to classify this practice as some earlier and primitive mode of thinking, subordinate to, or inferior to, religion. In the words of the influential J. G. Frazer, a pioneer in the anthropological study of magic, magic is to be taken as little more than "the bastard sister of science." While professional bias still exists and scholars are perhaps still limited by their own prejudices (to a degree), access to and interpretation of ancient texts is steadily improving; is it time for a reassessment of our first "scientific" impressions of magic?

Writing in 1996, Graham Cunningham undertook one of the few comprehensive studies of the Sumerian incantation literature to date.¹ He focused on incantations from the Pre-Sargonic, Sargonic, Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, probing their conceptual development, the ways in which the magic was legitimated in the Mesopotamian mind and the effects or goals of the incantations (among other considerations). Recent trends in anthropology have begun to reassess some of the ideas of the early scholars including the divide between magic and religion in the ancient mind - Cunningham's study emerges as a convincing justification for this reassessment as the author observes in the relevant corpus that again and again that the power of the magic stems not from the exorcist priest but from the gods themselves. Further solidifying the connection of magic and religion is the repeated use of divine purifiers which empower a ritual by their nature as mediators between heaven and earth; in this way, the *materia magica* of Sumerian magic mirrors the religious logic inherent in the temple itself – these elements of the religio-magical worldview are holy or efficacious by virtue of their ability to transcend the temporal realm and to manifest the divine.

While Cunningham was aware of this parallel (and indeed, it formed the backbone of his argument) the author was unable to discuss the temple and its role as mediator at length. This

¹ Graham Cunningham *Deliver me from evil : Mesopotamian incantations, 2500-1500 BC* Studia Pohl: Rome. 1997

paper will explore these basic proposals in more detail attempting to confirm the connection between magic and religion attempting a juxtaposition of the divine mediation of the temple and that of the *materia magica*, a connection which seems to have gained little acceptance so far.²

1.0 *The Temple as Axis Mundi in Nippur and Babylon:*

Stephen Maul's excellent discussion on the navel of the world in Mesopotamian contexts provides insight into the Mesopotamian spatial and temporal perspectives, an important part of which was the notion that the temple acted as "World Axis" or "Axis Mundi." This was certainly the case for Marduk's temple in Babylon, the *E₂-temen-an-ki*, "House foundations of Heaven and Earth."³

As the author relates, the *Enuma Elish* positions the temple and its sanctuary over the *apsû*, "over location which Marduk came from" and at the same time the temple was seen as directly underneath AN, the heaven god: "Each of the three cosmic domains - the heavens, the surface of the earth and the earth itself - was, according to this idea, ruled by a palace of the gods."⁴ Together these three levels formed a vertical axis, establishing *E₂-temen-an-ki* as axis mundi and mediator between the realms. For Maul, the status of the temple as axis mundi reflected not just its position at the center of spatial reality – but its position at the center of temporal reality. Thus the temple is replete with images of Marduk's slain primordial enemies "as a sign that one never forgets"⁵; further, the shrine contained a representation of the *du₆-ku₃*, or sacred mound, thought to have arisen at the beginning of the world from pre-temporal water: "In the walled pedestal at the vestibule of the temple, understood as the mythical primeval hill, the pre-world – the primeval beginning of all existence and all time -- pushed itself, so to speak, out into the present of the Babylonians."⁶

2 For example, M. Geller's review of Cunningham in AfO 46-47: 269-273 is completely silent on the matter.

3 Stehpan Maul. Die altorientalische Hauptstadt -- Abbild und Nabel der Welt," in *Die Orientalische Stadt: kontinuierat. Wandel. Bruch. 1 Internationale Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft. 9.-10. Mai 1996 in Halle/Saale. Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag* (1997), p.109-124. (Translated from the German by Thomas Lampert, Ph.D., Berlin, Germany.)

4 Maul 1997 pg. 5

5 Maul 1997 pg. 6

6 Maul 1997 pg. 7

Of course this notion of the navel of the world is by no means restricted to late Mesopotamia and the Du₆-ku₃ was an ancient cosmological tenet found in diverse Sumerian shrines. Maul adds that perhaps the best known example is from the shrine of Enlil at Nippur, here again the DUR-AN-KI, "connection between heaven and earth" was most definitely an axis mundi.⁷ In the Sumerian text *Enlil and the Hoe*, Enlil uses his sacred hoe to first separate heaven and earth and secondly to "raise the axis of the world at Dur-an-ki."⁸ It's clear that Dur-an-ki was in fact the temple area which contained the E-kur shrine⁹ and according to the text "Enlil and the E-kur" it was envisioned as being "in the middle of the four quarters of the earth."¹⁰

An additional point for comparison is the description of the E-Abzu found in *the Temple Hymns*; not only is Enki's temple praised as having "grown together with heaven and earth" and as the "foundation of heaven and earth", but it is also called "E-du-kug (House which is the holy mound)."¹¹ In any case, it's clear that the temple as mediator between heaven and earth was not restricted to any one period of Mesopotamian history; further it was not restricted to temples lying within Mesopotamian political capitals (as Nippur was not itself a political capital) nor was it restricted to the temple of the chief god (as Enki's temple receives similar praise). The temple as mediator emerges as a general tenet of Mesopotamian temple religion rather than as an aspect of politically empowered centers alone.

1.2 *The Temple of Ninurta in Lagash - a case study*:¹²

The E-ninnu temple, built by Gudea for the god Ninurta, provides us with an unusually detailed view of its cultic significance and this is largely thanks to the preservation of two large cylinders preserving a text sometimes dubbed *The Building of Ningirsu's Temple*.¹³ This text,

7 Maul 1997 pg. 8

8 <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.5.5.4> line 7

9 "He moored the boat at the temple area of Nibru, the temple area Dur-an-ki, at Enlil's Kar-geština." A praise poem of Šulgi (Šulgi D): lines 382-4

10 <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.4.05.1> line 67

11 <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.4.80.1> lines 1-7

12 The following comments on the E-ninnu have been adapted from a dissertation completed by Anne Rebekka Øiseth, *With roots in the Abzu and crown in the sky: Temple construction in between myth and reality*, Oslo 2007.

13 Translated at the ETCSL at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#>

among other things, enumerates steps taken to ensure that Ningirsu's temple will be fashioned according to its divine plan, that all was done correctly, and that the temple is a pure place – what is also apparent is that it will be a place where heaven and earth unite.

The first sign of this is the frequency with which the temple is referred to as *kur*, or *hur-sag* having the meaning here "mountain." Øiseth points to cylinder A lines 19-23 for an indication of the significance of this designation:¹⁴

“They made the House grow high like a mountain; they let it float like a cloud in the midst of the sky. (...) The House is made to raise its head in between earth and heaven like a mountain.

The temple as cosmic mountain bridges the gap between the realms therefore. Perhaps a related and even more interesting praise of the temple is that it is the "mooring post" of the land:

*House, mooring post of the Land, grown so high as to fill the space between heaven and earth, E-ninnu, the true brickwork, for which Enlil determined a good fate, green hill standing to be marveled at, standing out above all the lands!*¹⁵

Whatever the proper translation of *dim-gal* ("mooring post") is, and interpretations vary, it seems clear that an analogy can here be made between the mooring post and the cosmic mountain, or the mooring post and *DUR-AN-KI* for that matter¹⁶, that is, the power of divine mediation is being invoked – the temple as connector of heaven and earth. As a final point on this subject, it should be noted that actually mooring posts were a key component in the construction of the temple and these mooring posts established a communion with the realm below, with Enki in his *abzu*. The analogy with the temple as mooring pole and mediator is made explicit by the text itself:

"The ruler built the house, he made it high, high as a great mountain. Its abzu foundation pegs, big

14 Øiseth *With roots in the Abzu and crown in the sky.* pg. 79

15 <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#> lines 815-819

16 Øiseth p.73 remarks that one would expect to hear the E-ninnu itself described as *dur-an-ki* since this term is applied to several other Mesopotamian temples; and yet she states that much of the same value of *dur-an-ki* can be found in the descriptions of the mooring posting in lines 815-819 of the cylinders.

mooring stakes, he drove into the ground so deep they could take counsel with Enki in the E-engura. He had heavenly foundation pegs surround the house like warriors, so that each one was drinking water at the libation place of the gods. He fixed the E-ninnu, the mooring stake, he drove in its pegs shaped like praying wizards." ¹⁷

2.0 Connections between Temple and Incantation Text: *en₂.e₂.nu.ru* and the gudug-priest

The opening formula or initial rubric of the incantation text has always been *en₂-e₂-nu-ru* (sometimes abbreviated to *en₂*). This phrase, given the translation "incantation" in all exemplars, was written in various forms in the earliest texts, for example, as LAK 358 (*SHU₂-AN-E₂*)-*nu-ru*. These variant forms are interpreted, on the basis of a comparison of texts, as being nonetheless "broadly equivalent to the earliest syllabic version of the formula [*en₂-e₂-nu-ru*]" ¹⁸

As Cunningham relates, Falkenstein originally proposed that LAK 358 refers to the temple of Enki (Falkenstein 1931 pg.6); Krebernik on the other hand, saw it as referring to a specific feature found in various temples and two passages that he cites relating LAK 358 to temples "also refer to the abzu, the E₂.NUN and the brickwork of KUR.MUŠ." ¹⁹ The exact significance and nuance of these connections are currently little understood however.

An association between the incantation priest and the temple can be drawn, at least in the corpus of early Sumerian incantations sampled in Cunningham's volume, and is evident, for example, in the person of the gudug-priest. While the incantations do not actually identify the person responsible for their performance, ²⁰ already in the Early Dynastic period their priestly functions are mentioned in relation to Ningirm, the goddess of magic, and the connection can be inferred. ²¹ Proving that these priests were attached to the temple (for the English translation "priest" can potentially imply more than it should) are lines such as those from Enlil and Namzid tara – the man replies to his god's inquiry that his come "from Enlil's temple. My turn of duty is finished. I serve at the place of the gudug priests, with their sheep. I am on my way home." Numerous other examples could be cited which position the gudug priest within the temple; what's worth noting is

¹⁷ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#> lines 602-610

¹⁸ Cunningham 1997 pg. 9 - the author here follows Krebernik 1984

¹⁹ Cunningham 1997 pg. 10

²⁰ Cunningham 1997 pg. 13

²¹ Ibid.

that the Sumerian incantation priest as part of the temple staff would be aware of the concept of divine mediation, that similar principals underlie magical rites should therefore come as less of a surprise.

3.0 *Mediation and Efficacy in Mesopotamian Magical Texts*

Magical efficacy in Mesopotamia can be considered to have come about largely (although not exclusively) by merit of theurgy - it worked by merit of its magical association with the will and intervention of the gods. Frequently the priest legitimates his incantation by insisting that the words he is speaking are not his own, but the words of the gods themselves. Thus, one incantation text states "It is not my incantation. It is the incantation of Ningirima" while another insists "It is an incantation of Šamaš. Šamaš cast the incantation."²² Cunningham has examined this aspect of incantation lore under the heading "Divine legitimation." Furthermore, the rituals themselves were thought to be the creation of the gods, and are occasionally referred to as being divine themselves; the *kalûtu* and possibly *ašipûtu* ritual texts are credited to the god Ea.²³ Another stock incantation phrase is the exorcist's typical verbal assault on the demon – his command that evokes the powers of the divine realms: "Evil Utukku, Alû, ghost, Sheriff-demon, god, and Bailiff-demon, be adjured by heaven, be adjured by earth."²⁴ Some qualification, however, may be made in observing that some texts portray the gods themselves employing incantations; this may suggest that in some cases the principals of efficacy involve more than just divine involvement (as the gods would have had that much before uttering their incantations).²⁵

For the purposes of this paper, a certain category of Sumerian incantation will be of particular relevance, the type called by Falkenstein "Kultmittelbeshwörungen". These incantations are primarily concerned with consecrating objects to be used in the purification of the victim. Judith Paul's phd dissertation examined the ritual texts and their concept of the sacred and her opinion of

22 Cunningham 1997 pg. 120

23 Judith Roberts Paul. *Mesopotamian Ritual Texts and the Concept of the Sacred in Mesopotamia* UMI : Ann Arbor Michigan 1992, pg. 302/ pg. 172

24 From the kiškanu-tree incantation – Markham J. Geller *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū Lemnūtu Incantations*. State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 5.

25 Following Tim Collins, *Natural Illness in Babylonian Medical Incantations*, 1999

the function of the Kultmittelbeschwörung essentially follows Jacobsen's initial impressions:

"Materials such as water or salt that were used in magic rituals were blessed. By enumerating their pure origins and sacred powers, their powers were, so to speak, recharged to their highest peak of magical efficacy."²⁶ While this view, that a ritual item is empowered by the incantation because it is reminded (in a sense) of its origins in the pure heaven or underworld has a degree of merit, the following discussion will suggest that this incantation type has as its goal the praise of the ritual item, and, like the temple, this praise established the item as mediator between heaven and earth. In line with this is Cunningham's observation that "objects understood as divine purifiers can in most cases be shown to have been present in the temple, they are inherently pure and transfer that purity, they function as mediators between divine domains (Heaven/Underworld) and the Temporal world."

27

3.1 *The Reed as Divine Purifier:*

An example of the reed as divine purifier is found in an Early Dynastic text from Lagash known as CIRPL URN 49, or alternatively as Ur-Nanshe's diorite plaque. Admittedly the text is something of an oddity, its aim relating to building foundation, and it is sometimes classified as a royal inscription, sometimes as an incantation. Cunningham calls the material "incantation like." In any case, the relevant section of the incantation reads:

Col. i
Pure reed!
Reed of the canebrake of Engur!
Reed, your top (arms)
are growing.
Your root
col. ii
Enki
(in) the earth has placed.²⁸

26 Paul 1992 pg. 236

27 Cunningham 1997 pg. 27

28 Translation from Peeter Espak. *Ancient Near Eastern Gods Enki and Ea: Diachronical Analysis of Texts and Images from the Earliest Sources to the Neo-Sumerian Period.* Tartu, 2006 pg. 44

Interestingly, col. 3 contains a line reading "Enki, the decision / prognostics let speak out!" Thorkild Jacobsen in his treatment of this passage, compares this line directly with the foundation deposits mentioned in *The Building of Ningirsu's Temple*: "Gudea in Cyl. A xxxii: 11-13 similarly stresses communication of the subterranean parts of the temple with Enki."²⁹ In any case, this incantation, considered a kultmittlebeschwörung by Cunningham, features the reed as divine purifier, an item which, like the temple, was rooted in the underworld and reaches for the heavens. As is borne out below, these characteristics become standardized in subsequent incantations of the same type.

3.2 *The ġiškin (Akk. Kiškanû) tree as divine purifier:*

Starting with incantation texts from the Sargonic period, praise of the ġiškin tree as divine purifier is attested. In line with Cunningham's assertion that these items are actually present in the temple, an Old Babylonian hymn to Nanna's temple at Ur states "in this place the majestic ġiš-kín flourishes for you". In another text, the Shrine at Nibru is praised in similar fashion: "My Nibru, where black [ġiškin] trees grow in a good place..³⁰ And in the Building of Ningirsu's Temple, line 587 states that the temple will raise "like the ġišgana tree over the abzu." This is instructive for although the tree was used as a purifier in various temples, it is the sacred tree of Eridu. This is evident in an incantation from Ashurbanipal's library, although the basic text is known from versions from the Sargonic period:

*A black kiškanu-tree grew in Eridu, created in a pure place,
the appearance of which is pure lapis which extends into the Apsû.
Ea's activities in Eridu are full of abundance,
his dwelling is right on the Netherworld,
and his sanctuary is Nammu's couch.³¹*

²⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen "Ur-Nanshe's Diorite Plaque" OrNs 54 1986, pg. 68

³⁰ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.5.1> line 28 – the ETCSL render the original ġiškin as "birch"

³¹ Translation from the kiškanu-tree incantation – Markham J. Geller *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū Lemnūtu Incantations*. State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 5.

Two later lines in the same incantation relate that minor deities in the entourage of Enki "took that *kiškanu*-tree, cast the spell of the *Apsû*, and placed it on the distraught patient's head." Like the reed, the *ĝiškin* / *kiškanu* tree, or its roots, were seen as 'extending into the *Apsû*'; it was a ritual item which, independent of any possibly medicinal effects, was cultivated for its magical ability to mediate between divine and temporal realms.

3.3 *Juniper (incense?) as Divine Purifier:*

The use of Juniper as a divine purifier is first attested in incantation texts in the Ur III period. Cunningham gives a few typical occurrences of this ritual item (text numbers follow the numbering system of this work):

Text 69 begins: *Juniper, of heaven its standard, of the underworld, the oak'*

Text 65 begins instead: *'The fragrance of the juniper fills heaven and the underworld'*³²

Again positioning this divine purifier within the temple, the author also makes mention of an incantation text which places the juniper in the abzu shrine: "They cleanse the dwelling of the *agrun*, they call his (Enki's) name at the stations, they purify the majestic shrine of the abzu, they cause the juniper of heaven, the pure plant, to come forth in its midst."³³

What's interesting about the juniper is that the texts seem to suggest that unlike the reed or the *ĝiškin*, the roots or branches of which reach toward heaven or the underworld, the juniper connects the realms by virtue of its smoke or fragrance (as indicated in Cunningham, text 65). This is not unexpected as juniper, along with pine, is commonly said to be burned as incense in Mesopotamian literature, a scent which is "pleasing to the gods." The Ur III ritual tablet published by Michael Dick contains a line that reads "(The incantation) "Purified with great junipers" is recited over the heaped incense"³⁴ and Joann Scurlock, in surveying the exorcistic response to

32 Cunningham 1997 pg. 81

33 Cunningham 1997 text 143

34 Michael Dick. A Neo-Sumerian Ritual Tablet in Philadelphia JNES 64 no. 4 (2005) pg. 278

ghosts, notes that in some rites a meal for the gods was prepared which made use of ritual incense: "During the Proffered meal, aromatic substances were burned on censers. Typically, juniper was used."³⁵ Again, the smoke, drifting from one domain to another, connects the ritual by mediating between the divine and the mundane.

Conclusion: Despite that early attempts at classifying magic lead anthropologists to posit a divide between this practice and religion, a consideration of the earliest written religio-magical worldview may force a reassessment of this stance: the same principals that were praised as making the temple a sacred place – that it '*raised its head in between earth and heaven like a mountain*', thereby mediating between the realms – are found in the divine purifiers used as magical ritual items. The connection is so close that temples are sometimes compared to purifiers (the E-ninnu is "like the *ĝišgana* tree over the abzu" – Gudea Cylinder A), and the purifiers mentioned in incantation texts can be for the most part placed in the temples along with the exorcists acting in the periods under discussion. With branches extending to heaven and roots sunk into the netherworld, mediation between the worlds emerges as the common goal in Mesopotamian religio-magical thought.

35 Joann Scurlock *Magical Means of Dealing with Ghosts in Mesopotamia* Chicago, 1988

Bibliography

Cunningham, Graham. *Deliver me from evil : Mesopotamian incantations, 2500-1500 BC* Studia Pohl: Rome. 1997

Collins, Tim "Natural Illness in Babylonian Medical Incantations" (Phd diss., University of Chicago 1999)

Dick, Michael. "A Neo-Sumerian Ritual Tablet in Philadelphia" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 64 no. 4 (2005) pg. 278

Espak, Peeter. "Ancient Near Eastern Gods Enki and Ea: Diachronical Analysis of Texts and Images from the Earliest Sources to the Neo-Sumerian Period." (Phd diss., University of Tartu, 2006)

Geller, Markham J. *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū Lemnūtu Incantations*. State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 5. 2006

Maul, Stephan. "Die altorientalische Hauptstadt -- Abbild und Nabel der Welt," in *Die Orientalische Stadt: kontinuierat. Wandel. Bruch. 1 Internationale Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft. 9.-1 0. Mai 1996 in Halle/Saale. Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag* (1997), p.109-124. (Translated from the German by Thomas Lampert, Ph.D., Berlin, Germany.)

Øiseth Anne Rebekka. "With roots in the Abzu and crown in the sky: Temple construction in between myth and reality" (MA diss., University of Oslo 2007)

Paul, Judith Roberts. "Mesopotamian Ritual Texts and the Concept of the Sacred in Mesopotamia" (Phd diss., University of Michigan, 1992)

Scurlock, Joann. "Magical Means of Dealing with Ghosts in Mesopotamia" (Phd diss., University of Chicago, 1988)

