

Preface

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 Tzvi 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. Veenhof 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. Niek 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. JoAnn 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 reassess 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 Namburbi texts by Stefan Maul (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 hemerological tradition in Mesopotamia. The contribution by Karel 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 apotropaeic figures at Mesopotamian temples, and suggests correspondences between archaeological remains and textual descriptions. Shaul Shaked and Christa Müller-Kessler (Emskirchen), 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 Cavigneaux (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 Aernold van Gosliga (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 NIAS 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.

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