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This volume has been prepared with the financial assistance from the Boston University Center for the Humanities.

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ISSN 1436-3038

e-ISSN 1868-8888

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Druck und Bindung: Hubert & Co. GmbH und Co. KG, Göttingen

☺ Gedruckt auf säurefreiem Papier

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

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Lorenzo Verderame

“Their Divinity is Different, Their Nature is Distinct!” Nature, Origin, and Features of Demons in Akkadian Literature

Abstract: “Demon” is a generic term that hardly fits the various Mesopotamian beings, which according to modern scholars are grouped under this category. Despite the evolution of demonic imagery through different periods and sources, these beings share a series of common features such as their origin, position and role in the pantheon, liminality, actions and powers, hybridity, and aerial form. In my paper I will analyze these features so as to argue that incompleteness constitutes the main aspect of their nature.

Origin and Status of the Demons

The Seven, warriors unrivalled, their divine nature is different, their origin is distinct ... When An, king of the gods, sowed his seed in the Earth, she bore him seven gods, he called them the Seven (*Poem of Erra* I 23f., 30f.).¹

The article herein presented is part of a personal research project and international collaboration, which started with a meeting in Rome (Mesopotamian Demons, “Sapienza” Università di Roma, 28/02/2011), whose presentations have been published as a monographic issue by the journal SMSR – Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni (see Verderame 2011a). The project has developed as a web-based international collaboration called Mesopotamian Demons, hosted on the Moodle platform of “Sapienza” Università di Roma. Some of the topics, treated in a general way here, are the subject of specific studies in print or in preparation and will be not discussed further. This is particularly the case regarding the relation between demons and deceased spirits (see below), which constitute the conclusive part of the paper I read at the meeting in New York. In this article, I intend to offer an overview of the demons’ features, followed by my conclusions. The use of the term “demons” is adopted here for convenience. The analysis of relevant sources, as well as of these beings as a group, is of necessity general and does not take into consideration individual figures. For these cases specific analysis of their evolution, their complex development (considering their origin, assimilation or interpretation) and overlapping with other classes of polytheistic religion (guardians, protective spirits, master of animals, minor gods and so on) should be proposed. For methodological and terminological matters related to demons in Mesopotamia, please see Capomacchia/Verderame 2011. Akkadian is transcribed in italics and Sumerian in small capitals. Translation and numbering of the lines of the Sumerian and Akkadian texts are according to the literature quoted in footnotes. Abbreviations:

AHw= von Soden 1959–1981

CAD= The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, 1956–2010

CT= Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum, 1896–

UH= *udug-hul/utukkū lemmūtu*, see Geller 2007

¹ Cagni 1969, 60f.

The author or editor of the *Poem of Erra*, when introducing the Seven (*Sibitti*), underlines both their distinct origin (*ilittu*) and their divine nature (*ilūtu*). This is a statement that could very well be applied in general to all the demons. In fact, as in the case of the *Sibitti*, most of the demons are said to have been generated by An and Earth:

Lord An copulated with the thriving Earth and she has born him a warrior without fear – *Asakku* (*Lugale* I 26 f.).²

The evil *Utukku*-demons are spawned from the seed of Anu (*UH* V 2)

Whoever is spawned by Anu's seed are children who are offspring of the Netherworld, they are (raised) by an evil nursemaid, they are the ones who suck the milk of an evil wet-nurse (*UH* IV 1–3 ~ V 10)

In all these cases, the primordial image of the Sky (An) sowing the Earth by means of the rain is proposed.³ Demons are therefore considered to be the seed or offspring (*reḥūtu*) of An.⁴

While demons may often be qualified with the divine determinative (^d), their divine status, as already stated in the *Poem of Erra*, is considered distinct or, at least, ambiguous: “He is not a god, but his voice is loud and his *melammu* is lofty” (*UH* XII, 15). They are not considered proper gods, but they are often presented as their messengers or attendants.

The evil gods (or: the Seven), messengers of their Lord Anu (*UH* XVI, 12, 35, 41)

They walk on the right side of Adad (the storm god) (*UH* XVI, 19)

They are throne bearers of gods (*UH* V, 158)

Furthermore, their creation is commonly functional and secondary in time. The best example is that of the *Lamaštu/Pāšittu* at the end of the *Atra-ḥasis* composition. The first form of humanity, which was created with no limits at all, that is, death, illnesses and so on, had increased so much that “the god got disturbed with (the people's) uproar” (*Atra-ḥasis* I 355). On account of this, the god Enlil, deprived of his sleep, decides to destroy humanity with the Deluge.⁵ Afterward, the gods proceed with the creation of a second form of humanity, but this time they establish a series of measures so as to limit the growth of the population. One of these measures is the creation of the *Pāšittu* in order to control the number of births.

² Van Dijk 1983, 55.

³ The Akkadian verb is *reḥū* “to inseminate” (Sumerian A-R1), see *AHw* 969; *CAD* R, 252–254, that is 253. The female role could be played by Antu, An female counterpart.

⁴ *AHw* 983; *CAD* R, 342. Surprisingly the epithet “son/daughter of An” is not common among demons (see Tallqvist 1938, 119f. and 124f.) and it seems to be an epithet specific to the *Lamaštu*. See Wiggemann 2000; cf. Farber 1990, 299f.

⁵ Lambert/Millard 1969, 66f. Regarding the topic of overpopulation, see Leichty 1971; Kilmer 1972; Rendu Loisel 2011, 324f.

(Let there be women who bear and women who do not bear) let there be a/the *Pāšittu* among the people, let her snatch the baby from the childbearer's lap (*Atra-ḫasis* III vii 3–5).⁶

From a cultic point of view, demons have no temples and they receive no worship or sacrifices;⁷ their involvement in rituals, especially in those related to healing, is instrumental in the sense of providing apotropaic protection. All these elements point to their position being lower than that of the proper gods in the hierarchical structure of the Mesopotamian religion and thus arises the question about their nature.

Nature of the Demons

The fact that they are often qualified as good (*tābu*/SIG) or bad (*lemnu*/HUL) implies that their nature is basically not evil, but neutral.⁸ These beings are chaotic natural forces, who, when subdued, may be controlled and used for one's own purposes.⁹ They might become assistants to the god who defeated them in the time of myth, or even protect the person who conjured them in rituals.

The role they play in the cosmic order is functional and necessary.¹⁰ This also implies that they could not be destroyed.¹¹ Apotropaic rituals aim at driving them away, rather than destroying them. Their actions have no ethical implication and they strike the guilty as well as the innocent.¹² They are often described as insensitive to prayers or offerings;¹³ a characteristic that points to their unemotional, mechanical, and implacable intervention:

⁶ Lambert/Millard 1969, 102f.

⁷ The only exception is the *Sibitti*, who had, for example, a temple at Dūr-Šarrukin/Khorsabad.

⁸ This assumption implies an ethical aspect, which finds no parallels in the Mesopotamian mind; at least according to our modern Western parameters. In general, in the polytheistic system, each god has the power to grant or deny something, that is, each god represents a principle and its opposite position. Often the god is the cause and the solution of something. This is clearly synthesised in the formula “Ea made Ea unmade” (*īpuš Ea ipšur Ea*) referring to evil omen and the relative solution to it in the apotropaic ritual (*namburbi*). Sufferance and illness are caused in the first instance by a denial of protection by the god; in the *Righteous Sufferer*, Marduk acts first as an implacable punisher and then as a merciful rescuer.

⁹ Compare the analysis of the Greek heroes by Brelich 1958.

¹⁰ As is the case of the *Lamaštu* in controlling birth discussed above.

¹¹ It is worthwhile mentioning that the killing or neutralisation of these beings in literary composition is perceived as an act against the divine order and consequently punishable; as the killing of *Ḫuwawa* in the *Gilgameš Epic* or the breaking of the South Wind's wings in *Adapa* indicate. The last statement opens up the question about the definition of a demon class. It is not possible to discuss this question here in any depth; see fn. 1.

¹² This is strictly related to the nature of suffering, a matter that has been developed and sublimated in the *Righteous Sufferer* composition.

¹³ This is a topic that goes back to the Sumerian demons (*GALLA*) chasing *Dumuzi*: “a motley crew, who know not food, who know not drink, who eat no sprinkled flour, who drink no poured water, who

They eat no food, they drink no water! (CT 17, 41: 9f.)¹⁴

They seize the one lying in his wife's room, having taken the son from the nursemaid's lap. They murder the father and children together, and they spear the mother together with children like fish in the water.

They know neither prayer nor supplication; they harass the man in the street (UH VI, 83–88).

The Demonic Space and Actions Therein

By their nature, demons belong to the chaotic element and they live and act in it. The chaos is created as a negation or opposition to the principles of order (fig. 1).

Order	Chaos
Life	Death
Light	Darkness
Noise	Silence

Figure 1: Principles of Order

In general, we could say that demons share all the traits of the chaotic element. Their actions aim at causing the victim's death. In some cases, they are defined as ministers of the Netherworld and in general their connection with the realm of death is always underlined (see below). Lastly, silence and darkness are concepts strictly related to death.¹⁵ In fact, a demonic attack normally takes place during the dark and silent night: "They are always agitated at night, always looking for trouble" (UH XVI, 42f.). During the night, a risky moment when ordinary activity was suspended, they could act in the ordered space and catch their victim while he was walking the streets unprotected:

The evil *Utukku*-demon and *Alû*-demon, who block the street for the one walking about at night, the evil ghost Sheriff-demons, who block the street for the one walking about at night (UH VII, 27f.),

or, they could even attack their victim while he slept in his own bed:

accept no pleasant gifts, who do not enjoy a wife's embraces, who never kiss dear little children, who never chew sharp-tasting garlic, who eat no fish, who eat no leeks" (*Dumuzi's Dream*, 111–118).

¹⁴ Foster 2005, 966.

¹⁵ In the destroyed cities, described in the Sumerian lamentations, silence reigns and the *lils* roam (demon/ghost breezes, see below); see Verderame 2011b. Most of the Akkadian terms for silence, such as *šahrartu* and *šaqqummatu*, are closely related to death and destruction. For the relation of darkness and death see in general Cassin 1968.

Whether you are the evil *Alû*-demon who is not seen (even) by daylight;
 ...who, in bed at night, copulates with a man in his sleep,
 ...'sleep-snatcher,' who stands ready to carry off a victim,
 ...who is a god stalking at night, who does not wash (his) filthy hands (*UH VIII*, 9–12).

In parallel, demons are related to winds and gales. In fact, in first instance, gales produce darkness:¹⁶

They are billowing clouds which causes gloom in Heaven,
 they are the blast of the rising winds which cause darkness on a bright day (*UH XVI*, 15f.).

The silence is related to destruction and death, in opposition to the noise produced by human society. The silent wasted lands, as well as the steppe, or the silent streets at night, are the places where demons lurk looking for victims. Nevertheless, noise could be one of the prime protective means against demons:¹⁷

You, demon who stands in the corner, when I shout, leave the corner for the street.
 You, demon who stands in the niche, when I shout, leave the niche for the street.
 You, demon who clammers onto the roof, when I shout, leave the roof for the street.
 You, demon who will have entered the house, when I shout, leave the house for the street.
 ...when I shout, fly far away through the window (*UH IX*, 26–29 and 32).

Besides shouting, the sound might be produced by a magical instrument.¹⁸ The copper drum called the “Hero of Heaven” is present everywhere in the rituals against demons:

Take the copper drum, the ‘Hero of Heaven,’ which drives out anything evil through the noise of its terrifying splendour, lead it to where the noise is given off, and may (the drum) be your ally. Through the incantation formula, the word of Ea, may the copper drum – hero of heaven – increase the noise of its splendour, so that the evil *Utukku*-demon and evil *Alû*-demons may go out, and so that the evil ghost, Sheriff-demon, god and Bailiff-demon go out, so that the evil *Lamaštu* and *Labašu* demons, who spit on the victim, go out (*UH VII*, 15–22).

Considering the urbanized and humanized space (the town) as the symbol of order, most of the features of urban life are denied to them.¹⁹ First of all, they live beyond the urban perimeter, in the steppe. Secondly, they have no dwelling place; instead

16 For the association of demons and winds, see below; for this topic in Sumerian literature, see Verderame 2011b, 120f.

17 For noises produced by demons, see Rendu Loisel 2011, 327.

18 Compare with the bronze bell with demonic images kept at the Vorderasiatische Museum in Berlin (VA 2517).

19 Most of these features are shared with the other “inhabitants” of the steppe, the nomads, see Verderame 2011b, 114.

they roam around.²⁰ Their physical traits are undefined²¹ and, in general, they tend to be described denying any normal human features.

Sometimes a dwelling place is attributed to the demons, even if it is an undefined one. The place where they were born and live is suspended between Heaven and the Netherworld, that is to say, they belong to neither of the two spheres properly.

Fly off to heaven, although you have no wing, and stay in the Netherworld, but may you never have a place! (UH V, 72)

The Seven gods of the broad heavens ... the Seven gods of the broad Netherworld (UH V, 83–84)

The attentive watcher-demon is always pursuing something, fashioned in the Netherworld, but spawned in Heaven (UH V, 142–143)

They are unknown both in Heaven and Earth; they are concealed by a radiance.

Those who roam about with open mouths are no longer,
their names do not even exist, neither in Heaven or Earth,
and in the census of Heaven and Earth they are not counted.

(But) they are powerful in Heaven and Earth (UH XIII-XV, 5–9)

Evil-*Utukku*, evil *ala*, evil ghost, have come forth from the Netherworld, [they] have come forth from the infernal regions into the land.

They are not known in Heaven, they are not understood in the Netherworld! (CT 17, 41: 1–4)²²

Nonetheless, their place may often be where Heaven, Earth, and the Netherworld touch, that is, the horizon: “Unsparring spirits, who were born in the base (*šupku*) of Heaven ... the Seven of them were evil gods who were whirling about in the base of Heaven” (UH XVI, 2, 29). Furthermore, the horizon is the place from where the heavenly bodies arise. Sin and Šamaš rise daily after their night travel in the Netherworld and set at the end of the day. In the mythological episode that tells of how the *Sibitti* obscured the Moon, the three astral gods (Sin, Šamaš and Ištar) are in charge of the horizon:

The moon, sun, and Venus were appointed to administer the base of Heaven, and together with Anu (Enlil) shared amongst them the rule of the whole of Heaven. To the three of them, his divine children (i.e., Sin, Šamaš, Ištar), it was they whom he ordered to be present night and day without cease. Ištar plots the eclipse of the moon (Sin). At that time, the Seven of them were evil gods who were whirling about in the base of Heaven, they kept circling furiously in front of the crescent moon (UH XVI, 25–30).

It is in one of the liminal places that the demons find their congenial dwelling. Another one is the mountain, which, in the Mesopotamian ideology, represents the for-

²⁰ Most verbs describing the action of the demons are in the Akkadian iterative form (*Gtn*). This suggests the idea of evil continually lurking, seeking out victims without cease.

²¹ See below. For the nomads, this results in partial animal traits. For the general lose of features in chaotic space, see Verderame 2011b.

²² Foster 2005, 966.

eign land, the chaotic, and the death realm; in short, the otherness *par excellence*. However, this mountain may well be more specific, as the *Epic of Gilgameš* suggests. It may be Mount Māšu or the Twin Mountains, an *axis mundi* that supports the sky vault and deepens its roots in the Netherworld.

When [he] arrived at Mount Māšu, which daily guards the rising [of the sun,] – their tops [*abut*] the fabric of the heavens, their bases reach down to Hades – there were scorpion-men guarding its gate, whose terror was dread and glance was death, whose radiance was terrifying, enveloping the uplands – at both sunrise and sunset they guard the sun (*Epic of Gilgameš IX*, 38–45).²³

At the same time, the Twin Mountains are the gates the Sun rises from and sets in daily, and that are guarded by the two scorpion-men. They are the access to the Netherworld, and so it is no wonder that the demons are born and live in this place.

They came out from the midst of the distant mountain, the Holy Mound (*UH VII*, 70) The Seven of them were born on the Western mountain, the Seven of them were raised on the Eastern mountain ... The Seven of them always run around on the Western mountain, the Seven of them play about on the Eastern mountain (*UH XIII-XV*, 46 f., 53 f.)

“Physical” Features of the Demons

The “physical” features of demons are indistinct and undefined. In the “monster-like” representations and descriptions, their shape is human, but their body is composed of a multitude of parts from other beings (hybridity).

H[er] breasts are [stripped off...]. A goat is ...
Like a fish [her body is do]t[te]d,
Like a *šeršerru*-paste her chin [...] is pale,
Her head is a lion's head,
Her teeth are donkey's teeth,
... of a dog... (Old Babylonian incantation against the *Lamaštu*, 1'7').²⁴

In this sum of parts, not one of them prevails; that is to say, it is impossible to describe or classify the being under analysis as pertaining to a specific class or group of animals. On the other hand, none of the parts are original or exclusive to a specific demon. In fact, while the descriptions of each being might differ, the same trait may be shared by other demons. The *Lamaštu* is described as having a canine or feline face, teeth that may be either fangs or those of an ass, as well as her ears in some cases, and lastly, her body can be covered with scales. Most of these features (a feline/canine face, scales, and so on) are also shared by *Pazuzu*. In con-

²³ George 2003, 668 f.

²⁴ Cavigneaux/al-Rawi 1994, 88–89.

clusion, the distinctive element of these beings is not the specific nature of their constitutive parts, but rather their hybrid nature.

The figurative language is used to construct, describe, and express the nature and the action of demons. The raised arm suggests the idea of aggressiveness and attack and the bird of prey's talons suggest that of an implacable and tight grip on their victims. Similarly, the long fingers or nails of the *Lamaštu* are useful for the snatching of babies, and this is constantly emphasized in her descriptions and representations.

Some features, on the contrary, are characteristic of the state of a dual being, expressing its specialized field of intervention. The flattened breasts of the *Lamaštu* relate to her sterility and denial of maternity,²⁵ as the wings of *Pazuzu* denote his closely bound relation with winds.²⁶

On the other hand, the demons' traits may be clearly unmarked. Their appearance can continually change, and they are often said to have no face at all,²⁷

The Seven of them, whose features change continually (*uttakkarū*) ... whose appearance is strange (*nakru*) (*UH XIII-XV*, 2, 4).

Whether you are the evil *Alū*-demon who has no face (*UH VIII*, 8)

Their appearance might work as a camouflage, as in the case of the *Ardat-lilī*, who attracts young men with her appealing aspect.²⁸

Aerial Nature of Demons

This absence of physicality leads us to the analysis of the last feature of the demons, that is, their aerial nature. Despite their monstrous traits and the physicality of their actions, demons are made of air. Like the wind, they sweep across the steppe and slither like smoke under the door of the house or blow through the windows.

She (the *Lamaštu*) entered the door of the house, slipping through the door socket (Old Babylonian incantation against the *Lamaštu*, 6f.)²⁹

You must not enter the [house], nor be present [in] the house,
nor return [to] the house,

nor will you sit with him at the threshold of the house,
nor go up with him to the roof.

You must not lean out of the window to him,
nor strike him down via the ribbed window,
nor cry out to him from the *karratu*-window,

²⁵ Pace Wiggermann 2010.

²⁶ Wiggermann 2007.

²⁷ Geller 2011.

²⁸ Lackenbacher 1971.

²⁹ Foster 2005, 173f.

nor may you look at him through the upper window,
ditto (= nor may enter to him) through the 'leaning-out' window,
ditto, through the lattice window,
ditto, through the tomb-opening (lit. window),
ditto, through the ventilation-window,
...
nor must you always slither through the door, bolt, or lock of the house to him (UH IX, 89'-101' and 110')

Therefore, these openings are dangerous places that require protection with rituals and *apotropaia*.³⁰

I have smeared on the threshold of the house the fat of a pure cow, pure fat, fine quality fat, and fine quality bitumen ... I have smeared the threshold of the house with bitumen and gypsum (UH IX, 55 and 75')
Fashion [two] bitumen statues of interlocked wrestlers, set (them) there on the threshold, recite the incantation (UH XII, 140 f.)
Adjure the gate of the house, from the window, from the side window, from the ... look-out window, swear an oath at the door bolt and threshold (UH XVI, 257–259)

Similarly, demons penetrate into victims through bodily openings. In the same way, through incantations, they are removed from the patient as if they were smoke slithering out.

Fly off to heaven, although you have no wing (UH IV, 176; V, 72; VI, 185)
May you ascend in heaven like incense (UH I, 35')

In general, the association of demons with gales, tempests, and strong, destructive winds is common.

The Fate (*Namtar*) who roams in heaven like a spirit (LIL₂/*lilû*) (and) the *Asakku*-demon who rolls in on the earth like a storm (MIR/*meḥû*), the evil *Utukku*-demon who has been running in the street, and the evil spirit who envelops like a tempest (U₁₈-LU/*mīlu*), have (all) disturbed the distraught victim and struck that man; they studied (the victim's) entire anatomy in order to lodge themselves in a diseased place (UH III, 1–6)

This demonic association with wind pertains to deceased spirits as well, as the Sumerian sources indicate. The Sumerian LIL₂ is a term which can refer to winds as well as to demons and ghosts, with no clear distinction among them, indicating a strict identification with the three concepts. The Akkadian term *lilû*, borrowed from the Sumerian LIL₂, remained part of the name of some demons; for example, the *lilû* and the *Ardat-lilî*, "girl of the wind".

Furthermore, one of the Sumerian terms for demons is UDUḠ, which is composed of the ideogram SAHARXSILA common to the term for "ghost" (GIDIM).²⁵ This ideo-

³⁰ On the use of apotropaic figurines, see, in general, Wiggermann 1992.

gram is composed of the sign for “dust” (SAHAR) and that for “street” (SILA) and may refer to an “image of a whirlwind being seen as a wraith.”³¹

Conclusions

This overview of the general features of the demon class leads to two main conclusions. Most of the demons’ features point to their primeval and intermediate status, which results in an incomplete, limited, and undefined essence. In fact, they have a distinct origin, being generated by a primeval couple (Sky/Earth), opposed to the successive generations of gods, on the one hand, and to the beings created by Enki/Ea and the mother goddesses, on the other. This connection with a primeval and incomplete phase results in a series of absent or undefined features, such as monstrosity³² and liminality. The second observation is related to the connection of demons with deceased spirits. This question has been widely documented and often reported *en passant*,³³ but its nature has never been analyzed in depth.³⁴

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31 2/3 SAHARxSILA = UDUG, 1/3 SAHARxSILA = GIDIM.

32 Monstrosity and primordial times and beings are strictly related. Compare, for example, the sequence of the primeval gods/principle couples and the monstrous features of Tiamat and her army in *Enūma eliš*.

33 See Geller 2011, 334.

34 This will be the subject of a specific study currently in preparation by the author of this work.

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