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# Akkadian Magic Literature

Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations:  
Corpus – Context – Praxis

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

Some words about the title of this book. Magic is a multifarious phenomenon, a chiaroscuro of the known and the unknown, where the here-and-now stretches to the far-and-beyond. In the sphere of magic, words and actions conjoin. Pain is soothed through words and fumigation, fears are quelled through hushed blessings and jangling amulets, and disease healed through the application of formulae and arcane pastes.

Classifying magic as ‘literature’ might therefore seem to unnecessarily delimit the boundaries of this rich field. And yet, when talking about cuneiform sources, appending ‘literature’ to magic is inevitable – but at the same time, debatable.<sup>1</sup> ‘Inevitable’, since ancient Mesopotamian magic – its practitioners, clients, *materia magica* and magic implements, as well its arcane *modes opératoires* – is buried under the oceans of time, leaving behind shell-strewn beaches in the shape of hundreds, if not thousands, of fragmentary texts that afford but a glimpse into the complex cultural enterprise of Mesopotamian magic.

But beyond the textual dimension, linking ‘magic’ and ‘literature’ is not immediately obvious, since many would argue that texts dealing with Mesopotamian magic are *technical* rather than literary. This question cannot be resolved by applying accepted linguistic criteria, but has to address the question of what literature is – in general, and in ancient cultures in particular. Our position is clear: the literary qualities of second-millennium Akkadian incantations are very real. The main argument against the inclusion of incantations in the realm of literature, viz. their *being used* in practices and procedures, is immaterial, as the concept of ‘pure’ literary texts, did not exist in ancient Mesopotamia. It is with this conviction that the main title for the present study was chosen.

‘Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations’ is self-explanatory. The period ca. 2000–1500 BCE, the formative phase of later Mesopotamian magic, yields fascinating incantations. The Akkadian incantations of the second part of the second millennium – Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian incantations – were studied by Zomer (2018a), whereas the Akkadian magic texts of the late third millennium, viz. Old Akkadian, Ur III period and especially Ebla incantations, still require systematic study (cf. Krebernik 1984). As for the early Sumerian incantations, Cunningham (1997) presented a preliminary catalogue of the Sumerian, Akkadian and alloglot incantations of the third and early second millennium and Rudik (2015) presented an analysis of the Early Dynastic and Ur III corpus. A detailed study of the vast corpus of Old Babylonian Sumerian incantations would be welcome.

Finally, the triad ‘Corpus – Context – Praxis’. These three terms denote that our study aims not only to present the texts in a sound philological manner, but also to understand the actual way they were used in early second millennium Mesopotamia.

This study commenced in 2013 with N. Wasserman’s three-year project financed by the Israel Science Foundation (“The Reality of Magic: The Corpus of Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations in their socio-historical and literary Context”, grant no. 116/13). A

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<sup>1</sup> On this question, cf. Schwemer 2014, 266–268.

delay in completing the project worked in our favour since two important works were in the meantime published, expanding our scientific understanding of early Akkadian incantations: A.R. George's *Mesopotamian Incantations and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection* (2016) and E. Zomer's *Corpus of Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian Incantations* (2018a). To bring this ambitious project to completion, E. Zomer started working on the project in autumn 2018. The present study is the fruit of collaboration of the two authors.

We would like to thank the following colleagues for their help on this book: Yigal Bloch, Yoram Cohen, Jeanette Fincke, Irving Finkel, Andrew George, Jacob de Ridder, Ulrike Steinert, Michael Streck, Yulia Tulaikova and Klaus Wagensonner. Thanks also to members of the SEAL project (*Sources of Early Akkadian Literature*: <https://seal.huji.ac.il/>), in Leipzig, in Jerusalem, and elsewhere. Thanks are also due to Ami Asyag, Jerusalem, for his technical aid. Susan Kennedy copy-edited our text.

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