

The “Queen of the Night” Plaque—A Revisit

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INTRODUCTION

In 1970 this writer published an article on the figural relief of the clay plaque then known as the Burney Relief (fig. 1), questioning the authenticity of the plaque based on the iconography of the ring and rod held in each open hand of the winged female figure.¹ This paper is a revisit to the clay plaque and a reconsideration of its authenticity. It relies primarily upon the information contained in earlier published articles on the subject and on art-historical comparisons with similar ancient Near Eastern objects that, for the most part, have been excavated.

In 1975 the Department of Scientific Research at the British Museum in London undertook a thermoluminescence test of the plaque—still in private ownership at that time—which showed that in the two tested samples the clay was ancient; however the laboratory results were not published. A recent inquiry furnished the following information:

One sample was taken from the broken area in the middle of the plaque on the right-hand side of the plaque, and the second sample was taken from the back, again from the top right-hand side of the plaque. The Department of Scientific Research has recently looked again at the TL measurements, and they say that re-examination of the glow curves confirms that the areas sampled were fired in antiquity. Although the samples indicate an age for the plaque between 2000 and 3700 years, such a wide range of dates is not unusual.²

My mathematical computations indicate a TL date between 1725 B.C. and 25 B.C.

The British Museum acquired the Burney plaque in 2003. It has now been renamed “The Queen of the Night” (hereafter British Museum plaque). Currently the British Museum staff assigns the date of the clay plaque between 1800 B.C. and 1750 B.C., to the Old Babylonian period of Hammurabi.³ The plaque is now described as one of only two major works of art from the reign of the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi; the other is the stone stele carved with the code of Hammurabi, housed in the Louvre in Paris.⁴ Since the plaque is without a provenience and was owned by an antiquities dealer in the early part of the last century, from whom it was purchased, there is the issue of whether one can legitimately date an unexcavated object to a specific time or historical period in antiquity. It is appropriate therefore to review the evidence presented by modern scholars and to compare the figural subjects on the British Museum plaque with excavated ancient Near Eastern art works. The study presented here should clarify the stated importance of the plaque, as it relates—or does not—to our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian art, primarily of the second millennium B.C.

1. Albenda 1970.

2. Personal communication from J. E. Curtis, Keeper, Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, The British Museum, dated March 6, 2001. On the limits of TL testing without the measurements from soil samples taken from the place where the object was found, see Brent 2001a: 31; Muscarella 2000: 143–44.

3. BBC News, 8 March 2004; see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3543435.stm>.

4. Moortgat 1969: 85, pl. 209.

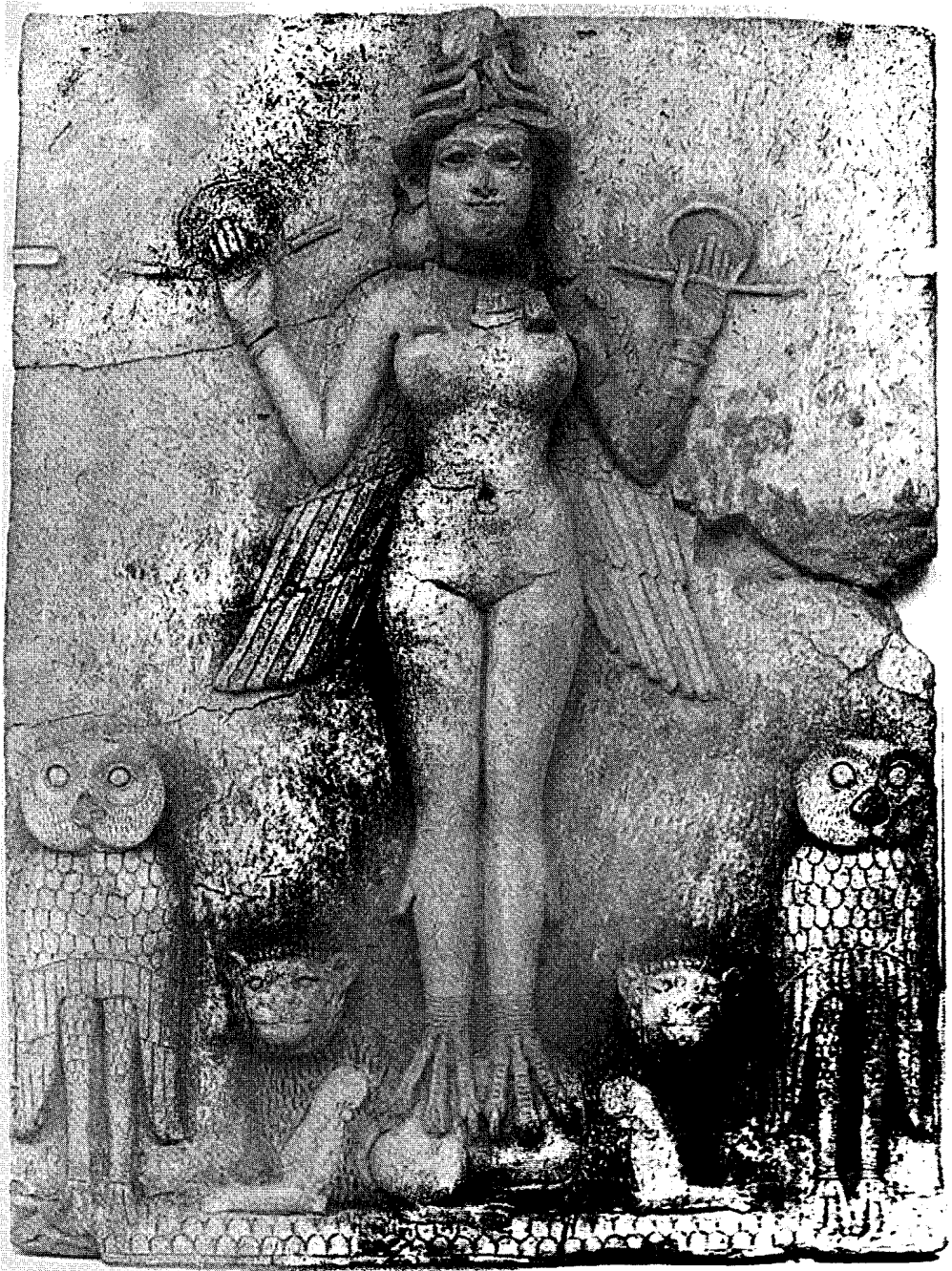


FIG. 1. British Museum plaque (former Burney Relief). Photo author.

BRITISH MUSEUM PLAQUE

The clay plaque is a unique work. When first brought to public attention in a 1936 article in the *Illustrated London News*, the plaque belonged to Sydney Burney.⁵ The article states that the object had been subjected to exhaustive chemical examination; therefore there can be no doubt on its authenticity.⁶ The article also dates the plaque to the "Larsa Dynasty in Sumeria," and there is an added comment that "the owls are a puzzle, for Minerva was not yet born." Until its purchase by the British Museum, the plaque remained in private collections in England and, more recently, in Japan.⁷ An early publication gives the following information: the rectangular plaque measures 49.5 cm by 37 cm, with an average thickness of 2 to 3 cm. The head of the winged female figure projects 4.5 cm from the surface, the lions project 4.8 cm, and the owls 4.6 cm. Traces of red ochre paint occur on the female figure's body, and red and black alternate on her feathers. In addition, the mane of each lion is covered with a hard bituminous compound.⁸ The traces of color are now much faded.

As shown in the 1936 published illustration of the clay plaque, damaged areas and cracks are readily observable. However, the heads of the animals, those of the birds, and the nude torso of the female are mostly intact. The extreme left side of the female's face and neck touching the background is damaged and partially destroyed. Her headdress, also partially damaged, consists of four pairs of horns topped by a disk, but evidently more breakage occurred sometime after 1936, since only three horns now remain at the proper left side of the headdress (fig. 2). The four-horned headdress is an item of divinity that occurs in the visual arts of Mesopotamia, particularly from the Ur III period to the Old Babylonian period. Moreover, that particular type of headdress is generally reserved for major deities, primarily the sun god Shamash and the goddess Ishtar. Noteworthy are the female's small hollow eyes, presumably designed for inserting inlay material. This feature is unique, since I know of no excavated clay statuette or terracotta figurine in relief whose eyes were originally inlaid. Inlaid eyes of various materials were applied to ancient Mesopotamian statuary in stone and metal, generally dated to the third millennium B.C.⁹

5. *Illustrated London News* 1936, 1047. Burney was an antiquities dealer who owned an art gallery in London. Of interest, Burney exhibited the upper part of a stone statue, which "an expert of the British Museum" suggested might represent Gudea himself. See *Science News: The weekly news magazine of Science*, May 2, 1931, at <http://sciencenews.org/articles/20010505/timeline.asp>. The statue entered the British Museum at a later date. For an illustration of the statue, see Frankfort 1996: 93, pl. 98; Parrot 1961a: 385, fig. 262. At some time in more recent years, an examination showed that the head did not originally belong to the body. The authenticity of the unexcavated isolated heads and statues of Gudea has been questioned. For a good summary on this subject, see Muscarella 2000: 172–73. Also interesting is Burney's sale in 1944 of a life-size crystal skull and the story related to the object, previously referred to as the "Burney Skull" and later as the "Skull of Doom." See <http://m.tice.home.comcast.net/writing/CS.html>. A similar crystal skull in the British Museum had been made with modern tools, which revealed it to be a forgery. Internet articles viewed in November 2004.

6. In a letter to Oscar White Muscarella, dated 4 December 1995, Curtis writes: "the plaque was examined in the British Museum Research Laboratory in 1935 by Dr. D. I. Plenderlith . . . Chemical analysis has established that the encrustations are unquestionably ancient and that the bitumen dried out in a way which is only possible in the course of centuries." I am grateful to Muscarella for this reference. Frankfort 1938: 132 noted further "some damage has been done by salt."

7. The plaque was exhibited in the British Museum between 1980 and 1991, at which time Mr. Goro Sakamoto owned it.

8. Frankfort 1938: 129.

9. Frankfort 1996: pls. 20, 39–47, 53–60, 109; Parrot 1961a: figs. 138–42, 206, 217–18. Also compare the small terracotta sculpted head of a deity discovered at Tellah (Ur III period), Frankfort 1996: 102, fig. 109, and a terracotta relief of a goddess with a flowing vase from Ur, Parrot 1961a: 387, fig. 301. Both examples have modeled eyes. Opitz 1938: 270, already noted that the hollow eyes were problematic.



FIG. 2. Detail: British Museum plaque. Photo author.

The centrally placed composite nude female stands in frontal position with her arms up-raised. In each open hand is what I describe in my 1970 article as a ring and rod (see n. 1), but which Frankfort has identified as a continuous coiled piece of rope (see n. 8); however the object in the right hand is mostly destroyed (the background surface is intact but an incised line and a darkened hue together emphasize the curve of the missing "ring"). The female has two wings that extend downward from slightly above and behind her shoulders. Her talon feet stretch over the haunch of one of two small recumbent lions whose bodies, one mostly hidden behind the other, turn outward, and whose heads are shown in frontal view. Beyond each of the lions a large owl-like bird standing in frontal pose completes the composition (fig. 1).

The female figure is modeled in high relief. Her fleshy torso with its narrow waist, full high breasts, contour lines of the hips and thighs, and the bone-structured legs disclose an artistic skill that is almost certainly derived from observed study. But the rather realistic rendering of the female's torso, marked by a deep navel, contrasts with excavated nude females in terracotta that are varied and sometimes clumsy versions.¹⁰ A feature of the female's body that deserves attention is the softly modeled pubic area. The addition of black paint, now much faded, represents the pubic hair, within which is a tiny vertical indentation (fig. 2). This particular, somewhat naturalistic rendering finds little parallel with nude female figures of the third to first millennium B.C., whose respective pudenda—"the pubic triangle"—is merely outline or decorated with crossed lines, or with curls as an eleventh-century B.C. Assyrian statue demonstrates.¹¹

The figural subjects on the British Museum plaque are arranged into a precise symmetrical composition. The axial symmetry derives from the vertical axis that extends through the center of the female figure. The one-behind-the-other bodies of the recumbent lions offset the strict symmetry of the plaque, although their frontal heads accord with the symmetrical design. The application of axial symmetry in Mesopotamian art of the third and early second millennia B.C. is rare for major art works; however, there are examples of a three-part emblematic design that consists of the lion-headed Anzu bird in frontal view whose claws touch the hindquarters of two animals standing back-to-back.¹² On the other hand, the axial symmetry of the plaque may be described as consisting of a five-part emblematic design, if one views the nude female, the paired lions, and the large birds placed at each side of the central group independently (see below). This five-part configuration contrasts with known emblematic designs produced during the second and first millennia B.C., which conform to the three-part symmetry.¹³

10. For select early Mesopotamian terracottas depicting nude females in frontal pose, see Parrot 1961a: figs. 300, 358 (b), 365, 366.

11. Bahrani 2001: 83, describes that ways that the pubic triangle is depicted in ancient Mesopotamian art, and notes that the central vertical incision on the pubic triangle indicates the separateness of the labia. She observes (p. 83) that in terms of size and detail, as shown on the nude female figures, the vulva is the site of sexual pleasure. Bahrani 1993: 13, notes further that the pubic triangle developed into a standard cuneiform sign for females. For the various depictions of the pubic triangle, see note 10. The Middle Assyrian statue, dated to the reign of Ashur-bel-kala, shows pubic curls; see Moortgat 1969: 122, pl. 250. The frontally posed, four-winged goddess carved on a late Assyrian ivory fragment from Nimrud shows her partially clothed, revealing an exposed pubic triangle patterned with incised lines; see Parrot 1961b: 375, fig. 330. Parrot identifies the winged female as Lilith. On the discussion and imagery of the Hittite goddess Šaušga, who is represented nude or partially nude, and with or without wings, see Alexander 1991.

12. Parrot 1961a: fig. 167a; Moortgat 1969: pls. 113, 117.

13. The limestone plaque discovered in a well at the ancient site of Assur is a notable example from the second millennium B.C. The main three-figure design consists of the large mountain god and two smaller water goddesses, one to a side. All three face to the front. The two goats floating in the air and nibbling on plants are ancillary motifs.

A noteworthy feature on the plaque is the placement of the three-toed talon feet of the two birds. The toes extend below the surface of the shallow platform, patterned with the common mountain motif and marking the ground line of the composition. The extension of the toes deviates from the standard method of representation in Mesopotamian iconography in which figural subjects, drawn or modeled in relief, rest *upon* the ground line for visual stability.¹⁴ Another detail that affects the spatial quality of the composition is the placement of the long, knobby-clawed toes of the female's talons. The clawed toes touch and overlap the body of the lion in the foreground and stretch downward considerably, but do not rest upon a ground line, thereby imparting a subtle notion that the female figure hovers in space. Although her main portion is contained within the frontal picture plane, since she is posed against the clay background and touching the lion whose body rests upon the platform defining the frontal plane, her modeled three-toed talon feet project beyond that imaginary plane. As a visual device this implied forward movement past the frontal plane disengages the female from the paired lions. The manner in which the composite female figure and lions are depicted departs from that shown on bas-reliefs with similar subject matter in Mesopotamian art. In those works the feet of the human or divine figure rest upon the back of an animal, thereby creating a unified image by placing both subjects in the same picture plane.

PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS

Soon after the British Museum plaque was brought to public attention in 1936, Dietrich Opitz questioned its genuineness.¹⁵ He did not consider the chemical analysis mentioned in the 1936 article sufficient to confirm the antiquity of the plaque, but correctly argued that comparison with excavated objects should be made. Opitz pointed out that the subject matter of the relief is without parallel, and that the two owls are absolutely unique.

On the other hand, Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren supported the authenticity of the clay plaque in an article that appeared with Opitz's article in the same journal issue.¹⁶ Van Buren refers to C. J. Gadd's 1933 published translation of a fragmentary Sumerian clay tablet found in a house at Ur in 1927 and dated to the end of the Larsa Period, ca. 1800 B.C. He assigned the text to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet XII. Gadd translates the text as follows:

The Dyer had not dyed his hair with it. At its root the serpent knew not silence, had made its nest. At its top the storm-bird (Zu) had put its young. In its midst Lilith ("ki-sikilá-lil la-ge é") had built a house.¹⁷

See Andrae 1977: 163–64. Abb. 144; Moortgat 1969: 111–12, pl. 236. Based upon stylistic parallels, Evelyn Klengel-Brandt 1980: 41–42, argues against the Middle Assyrian date generally assigned for the plaque, and for the time of the Old Babylonian period of the nineteenth to seventeenth centuries. Douglas Frayne 1997 also argues against the mid-second millennium date for the Assur plaque and for a date about four centuries earlier, that is, sometime in the Old Assyrian period.

14. Among the examples that may be cited are the late-second-millennium Hittite deities represented on the rock reliefs at Yazılıkaya and the first-millennium Assyrian deities represented on the rock reliefs at Bawian. See Akurgal 1962: pls. 76, 77; Pritchard 1969: 314–15, pl. 537. For a late-third-millennium or early-second-millennium example, see now the terracotta plaque excavated at Mari: Pic and Weygand 1983: 201–9, cover, pl. I 1–2, figs. 1, 2. Of related interest is the fragmentary terracotta plaque from Nippur on which is depicted the lower part of a bird or winged demon turned frontally, whose three toes of each foot extend to the ground line. See Legrain 1930: 20, no. 228.

15. Opitz 1937: 350–53; 1938: 269–71.

16. Van Buren 1937: 354–57.

17. Gadd 1933: 127–43.

According to Gadd, the object of this description is a tree; that the *ardat lili* has built a house in the trunk of the tree suggests that the demoness here is an owl. But he adds that *ardat lili* in Babylonia is never described as an owl, and that the Jewish tradition identifying Lilith with the owl seems to be of late date.

Van Buren accepts the owl image suggested by Gadd, asserting that the treatment of the legs and wings of the goddess are "precisely like those of owls, in fact one might imagine that she was a 'goddess-owl.'" She also refers to an Old Babylonian hymn written on a tablet from Ur extolling Ishtar—the Venus star—from which she arbitrarily concludes that Ishtar has been metamorphosed into a bird.

Henri Frankfort supports the authenticity of the clay plaque, arguing that the "presence of features unparalleled elsewhere is irrelevant since our knowledge of Mesopotamian art is very slight."¹⁸ He cites a few examples, such as the head of a male deity in terracotta from Ur, to demonstrate that the stylistic qualities of the bought work accord with excavated authentic works. He also notes that the iconography should not conflict with the general trend of ancient beliefs as known in the texts, and he surmises that the plaque is probably a cult object. However, he does not agree with Van Buren's view that the relief shows Ishtar, a view incompatible with his, but maintains that it represents Lilith, indicated by her bird-like features, whose specialized character is the very opposite to that of Ishtar. Frankfort therefore concludes that there can be no doubt that the lady "renders an inhabitant of the Land of Death."¹⁹ Years later, Frankfort again validated the plaque and his interpretation of its subject matter in his survey of ancient Near Eastern art.²⁰

Thorkild Jacobsen accepts Frankfort's suggestion that the clay plaque is a cult object, but disagrees with him, stating: "since demons had no cult the figure depicted is unlikely to be a demon."²¹ He observes that the lions suggest Inanna, since she is the only goddess associated with lions. Thus, according to Jacobsen, the plaque served as a cult relief at the house altar of an ancient bordello, which would explain the nudity of the female figure. Edith Porada also supports Frankfort's interpretation, noting that the bird wings of the "beautiful woman" point downward, a criterion of a demon. She suggests that the figure might be identified with the female ruler of the dead.²² The British Museum staff accepts the last assertion, according to a 2004 British Newsroom report on the Internet, where it is suggested that the female figure on the plaque may represent Ereshkigal, Ishtar's sister who ruled the underworld.²³

All the above identifications rely upon interpretations of both the relevant texts and the respective images represented on the British Museum plaque. Opitz considered the plaque a forgery, a position that I concurred with in my 1970 article; other scholars accepted the genuineness of the plaque, but differed on the identification of the winged female: Lilith, Ishtar, or Ereshkigal. The last-mentioned female is documented in Mesopotamian

18. Frankfort 1938: 128. In the same article he also defends dealers on the matter of the authenticity of bought objects by stating: "even if they know its origin to be above dispute, they cannot disclose its provenance without victimizing those upon whom they are dependent for future supplies." Frankfort's statement does raise the question of whether artifacts purchased from dealers are plundered or newly manufactured.

19. Frankfort 1938: 135.

20. Frankfort 1996: 110–12.

21. Jacobsen 1987: 7.

22. Porada 1980: 266.

23. <http://thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/newsroom/current2004/html> dated 12 February 2004. The Ereshkigal identification has also been suggested by Elizabeth von der Osten-Sacken 2002.

myths,²⁴ but no identifiable representation of her occurs in excavated ancient Near Eastern art. A survey of the nature of Lilith and Ishtar as recorded in the texts and their representations in ancient Near Eastern art is necessary, in order to conclude whether the British Museum plaque is a forgery or not. Therefore, this study focuses on the relevant textual data and the analysis of both the iconography and style of excavated art objects, to support comparison with the sculpted female on the British Museum plaque. The study of the owl and lion should provide further clarification in resolving the authenticity of the subject matter on the clay plaque, since these animals are an integral part of the composition.

DISCUSSION

Lilith: As noted above, the first identification of Lilith resulted from Gadd's translation of the fragmentary Sumerian tablet. The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* identifies *lilitu* or *lilu* (male) as a demoness, and cites several examples in ritual texts.²⁵ An eighth-century B.C. Babylonian *Utukki Limnuti* incantation to block the entry of the enemy into someone's house mentions among the descriptions and names of evil spirits "the robber *lilû*, or *lilitu* or handmaid of *lilû*."²⁶ These creatures seem to have been faceless, since no physical features are explicitly cited in the ritual text. In addition to these evil spirits there was the *eššebu*, a bird of ill portent.²⁷ In his survey of ancient Near Eastern art, Frankfort referred to Isaiah 34.14 to support his identification of the composite female on the Burney plaque with Lilith. H. W. F. Saggs later pointed out that *lilitu* the feminine demon has been identified with the Hebrew word *lilû*, "night-monster," according to the translation of the English Revised Version of Isaiah 34.14.²⁸ Other modern translations of the Hebrew word in Isaiah 34.14—the Revised Standard Version and the King James Version—identify the monster as "night hag" or "satyr," respectively. Mention of the owl does occur among the wild beasts and birds that shall settle in the wasted land of Edom. For example, the comparable Isaiah 13.21–22 states that "wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of owls, and ostriches shall dwell there, and the scops owl shall hop about there."²⁹

In his recent study of the portion of *Gilgamesh* Tablet XII that Gadd published in 1933, Andrew George translates the relevant lines of the text as follows:

In its base a Snake-that-knows-no-Charm had made its nest, in its branches a Thunderbird had hatched its brood, in its trunk a Demon-Maid had built her home. The maiden who laughs with happy heart, holy Inanna was weeping.³⁰

This translation does not support the interpretations of Van Buren and other scholars who have identified the female figure on the British Museum relief as the goddess Inanna or Ishtar. Moreover, several lines later in the text one reads that the Sumerian hero Bilgameš (Gilgamesh in Akkadian) tore down the tree and gave the wood to the goddess for her

24. See the Sumerian myth "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld," and the Akkadian myth "Nergal and Ereshkigal": Pritchard 1969: 52–55, 103–4. In Jacobsen 1978: 58, Ereshkigal is described as follows: "her talons were like a copper rake(?) upon her, the hairs on her head were like (spiky) leeks."

25. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (hereafter *CAD*) L (1973), 190. For discussion of the *lilû*-demon and references to representations of the nude winged goddess, see Groneberg 1997: 126–30.

26. Wiggerman 1992: 7.

27. *CAD* E (1958), 370–71. For an identification of *eššebu* with the harrier, a bird of prey, and not likely an owl, see Veldhuis 2004: 272–74, 337, illus. no. 19.

28. Saggs 1966: 485.

29. *The Holy Scriptures* (1962), 491.

30. George 1999: 179–80, 182–83.

throne and bed. In addition, there is no support in George's translation for a linkage between the Demon-Maid and an owl.

In Mesopotamian iconography there are no known parallels for the nude winged, talon-footed female represented on the British Museum plaque, although demon-like creatures do occur, particularly on cylinder seal designs of the second millennium.³¹ Neo-Assyrian bronze statuettes of the demon Pazuzu show it to be four-winged with talon feet.³² Other talon-footed monsters of the Assyrian period are represented on the seventh-century B.C. bas-reliefs of Ashurbanipal.³³ These lion-headed male figures, armed with a mace and dagger, served as protective beings in entranceways of the royal residence.

Ishtar: Both Van Buren and Jacobsen identify the nude female on the British Museum plaque with the Akkadian goddess Ishtar (Inanna in Sumerian). However, each presents a different aspect of the goddess, as "goddess-owl" and as "goddess of harlots." The former identification does *not* occur in ancient Mesopotamian texts, while the cultic celebrations in the worship of the goddess, described in the ancient texts, may have included sexual activities.³⁴ Ishtar has been described as multi-faceted and associated with various characteristics.³⁵ Zainab Bahrani also discusses the various aspects of the goddess and states, "the extremes and opposites combined in the figure of Ishtar make her the superlative sign of difference."³⁶

An early representation of Inanna/Ishtar is the large stone statue discovered at Susa, dated to the Akkadian period, and now in the Louvre.³⁷ The goddess holds a goblet and a palm leaf or plant in the right and left hand respectively, and sits on a square throne. The throne is decorated with four lions carved in shallow relief, one at each side and two at the back. At the base, below the feet of the goddess, are two recumbent lions that confront a large rosette. In later times this floral motif sometimes served as an emblem associated with the goddess. The prominent depictions of the lions on this statue provide evidence of their direct association with the goddess by the late third millennium B.C.

In the visual arts, the grouping of a goddess with a lion continued into the later Old Babylonian period, best exemplified by its occurrence in the wall painting from Mari, dated to the time of Hammurabi.³⁸ Ishtar stands with one foot on a small recumbent lion whose mouth is open. In her raised right hand is a ring and rod, and in her lowered left hand is a scimitar; from each shoulder emerge three weapons, a mace between two axes. This pictorial version shows the fully clothed goddess in her warrior aspect. A clay plaque discovered at the same site, produced during the same or an earlier period, depicts in relief the armed goddess flanked by two important officials.³⁹ Ishtar is posed frontally, although her feet are turned

31. Collon 1988: 66, 183, nos. 276, 867-71; Pritchard 1969: 334, fig. 705.

32. Pritchard 1969: 328, no. 659; Oriental Institute 1982, fig. 46 (A 25413). The two bronze statuettes have no archaeological provenience; the Louvre statuette was acquired in 1874; see Pottier 1924, 131-33, fig. 146. A similar representation of the Pazuzu demon occurs on small plaques; see Pritchard 1969: 328, 381, figs. 658, 857. The female demon Lamashtu is also depicted on these plaques. For discussion and representations of Pazuzu and other talon-footed monsters, see Green 1985: 75-82, pls. vii-xv. For brief discussion of maces in the form of Pazuzu heads, see Muscarella 1988: 289.

33. Barnett 1976: pl. LV.

34. Jacobsen 1978: 139-40.

35. Harris 1991: 261-78. For a discussion of the male/female aspects of Inanna/Ishtar, see Groneberg 1986.

36. Bahrani 2001: chapter 7.

37. Amiet 1976: 38-39, pl. 36 a-c, fig. 35.

38. Parrot 1961a: 278, fig. 346 (color).

39. Pic and Weygand 1983: cover illus., pl. I 1-2, figs. 1-2.

outwards, and she stands upon the back of a recumbent lion turned to the viewer's right. She is fully clothed and wears the horned headdress, which defines her divine status. The iconographic image of the clothed Ishtar standing on the back of a lion continued into the first millennium B.C., and a fine example occurs on a stone stele discovered at Til Barsip.⁴⁰ In this work there are several modifications in the depiction of the figural group. The goddess, who is identified by an inscription as Ishtar of Arbela, turns to the viewer's right. A quiver appears from behind each shoulder, and at the back is a spiked shield. Ishtar holds the rope tied to the lion, which strides forward with its mouth open wide and its tail turned up.

Thus, the standardized iconography of the clothed warrior goddess Ishtar standing upon one lion can be traced back to the early second millennium, and this imagery continued into the first millennium. Over time details in the depictions of the goddess, her weapons, and the lion were modified to satisfy the style of the period.

There is, however, an example of the clothed warrior goddess standing upon two recumbent lions. She is depicted on an unprovenienced small molded plaque that was first published in 1917 and is presently housed at Yale University (fig. 3).⁴¹ Van Buren cited this plaque in her article mentioned above, and in her 1930 monograph dated the plaque to ca. 2100 B.C.⁴² The goddess on the Yale plaque has a tall horned headdress (three-quarter view) topped by a disk, and is attired in a long pleated dress that is belted at the waist. Across her chest are two straps that hold the quivers at her back. In her extended left hand is a bow and arrow held in upright position, a common method of illustrating bows in Mesopotamia in the first millennium B.C.⁴³ In her lowered right hand, Ishtar grips a long curved stick or weapon that touches the head of one lion. This object is similar to one held by the hero-type figure on the monumental wall reliefs from Khorsabad,⁴⁴ and by the god Marduk who is represented on a Neo-Babylonian lapis-lazuli stone from Babylon.⁴⁵ The armed Ishtar on the Yale plaque stands with one foot on the neck of each lion to indicate that, visually, the two animated animals carry equal weight as supports for the standing goddess. The outward-facing, open-mouthed recumbent lions are depicted viewed from the side and are positioned one behind the other upon a low base. The s-curved tail of the foreground lion rests below the base line, a detail similar to that shown on the British Museum plaque. The manes of both lions are patterned with a series of vertical striations.

The particular weapons that the Yale goddess possesses compare favorably with those on other first-millennium representations of Ishtar.⁴⁶ Contrary to the date cited by Van Buren, the Yale plaque should be dated to the first millennium, probably the late eighth or seventh century B.C. Therefore the Yale plaque cannot be used stylistically to authenticate the British Museum plaque, whether or not one accepts the proposed dates for both plaques—a separation of about a millennium. Probably to the same general period belongs the fragmentary

40. Pritchard 1969: 312, fig. 522.

41. Clay 1917: 77, fig. 5 (bottom row).

42. Van Buren 1930: 93, fig. 130.

43. See: Moortgat 1969: pl. 273; Andrae 1977: Abb. 56. Of interest, among the images of Assyrian kings displayed on the palace wall reliefs are those of Ashurnasirpal II holding the end of the upright bow that rests upon the ground, and of Ashurbanipal gripping the bow and arrows upright above the ground. At the feet of the ninth-century king is a dead lion, while four dead lions are aligned one behind the other at the feet of the seventh-century king; Moortgat 1969: pls. 266, 288.

44. Albenda 1986: pls. 15, 17, figs. 7–8.

45. Koldewey 1981: 216, Abb. 135; Pritchard 1969: 312, fig. 523.

46. See: Collon 2001: 127–29, figs. 240, 243 (seal impressions); Koldewey 1981: 160, Abb. 102 (stone relief); Gibson, Zettler, and Armstrong 1983: 186, fig. 28 (clay plaque).



FIG. 3. Terracotta plaque (YBC 10006): armed goddess on recumbent lions. Photo courtesy of the Babylonian Collection, Yale University Library.

terracotta plaque excavated in the Merkes area at Babylon and illustrated in Van Buren's 1937 article.⁴⁷ It depicts the lower part of a nude female standing on the backs of two recumbent lions whose bodies are turned outward and whose heads are turned to the front. The heavily damaged surface makes it impossible to describe the feet of the winged or cloaked female, but that it renders the talons of a bird is unlikely in the absence of excavated parallels.

Returning to the nude female on the British Museum plaque, a prominent feature is the pair of wings. They appear slightly above the shoulders unnaturally, and extend downward to the level between the hips and knees. Each wing is divided into three layered sections: the upper covert patterned with small scales and two rows of long thin feathers. Together, the three divisions of the wing form a jagged outer edge. Although representations of a winged female deity occur in seal designs of the late third and second millennia B.C., here the wings extend outwards from the back of the goddess.⁴⁸ In this regard it should be pointed out that Mesopotamian images of anthropomorphic figures with two or four wings invariably show the wings extending from behind the shoulders or torso. Moreover, there are no known parallels between those wings and the paired version on the plaque.

In 1952 Marie-Thérèse Barrelet published an article that deals with a group of small molded plaques, each one depicting a nude woman in frontal or near frontal pose.⁴⁹ She assigns these plaques to the Old Babylonian period. Her study demonstrates that, although their images vary, the females, depicted with or without horned headdress, are shown with their capes partially or completely pulled back, thereby exposing a nude body. Two of her illustrated plaques are of particular interest, since the female depicted in each example wears a horned headdress. On a plaque from Nippur, the nude goddess stands with her upper torso turned to the viewer's right and has both arms raised in front of her in a suppliant pose.⁵⁰ Covering her back and slightly raised above the shoulder is a long pleated cape that reaches to her ankles. On a plaque from Ur, the nude goddess is in frontal position and stands with both arms raised to her breasts (fig. 4). The overly large toes of her feet rest upon a high platform. Barrelet assumes that this figure has talon feet, but note that toenails are indicated.⁵¹ One also observes here that the upper part of the long cape covers the shoulders and upper arms, and that the lower portion of the fabric is plaited to form a chevron pattern. The manner in which the cape is rendered in both excavated plaques, that is, slightly above the shoulders of the respective goddesses, is similar to that shown for the *wings* belonging to the composite female on the British Museum plaque. Thus we may assert an iconographic linkage between the depictions of the wings on the latter plaque and the capes on the molded plaques. In brief, the nude, talon-footed female on the British Museum plaque could be described as reflecting the manner of wearing a short cape designed here as wings.

The motif of a female with ankle-length cape or wrap turned back to expose her nudity also occurs in cylinder seal designs of the Old Babylonian period and in designs of the later second millennium.⁵² In every known example the female has human feet, with or without

47. Reuther 1926: fig. 218.

48. Pritchard 1969: 312, fig. 526; Amiet 1980: 52, figs. 11–14, 15; Collon 1988: 70, figs. 311, 314.

49. Barrelet 1952: 285–93.

50. Barrelet 1952: fig. 40; Opificius 1961: 72, Taf. 3, no. 208.

51. Barrelet 1952: fig. 6; Zervos 1935: pl. 138. Van Buren 1937: 354, describes the nude goddess on the terracotta plaque from Kish, which she illustrated, as showing clawed feet. It is equally reasonable to distinguish toes that extend over the haunches of the two back-to-back recumbent goats. The "wings" of the goddess may also be interpreted as a cape thrown back to expose her body.

52. Collon 1988: 50, 125, 138, 167, figs. 191, 541, 581 (winged), 778.



FIG. 4. Terracotta plaque from Ur. Nude goddess with cape over shoulders. After Zervos 1935, pl. 138.

footwear. Among those representations is a winged nude or semi-nude female, identifiable as a goddess. Also note that several stone monuments dated in the mid-second millennium depict a wingless nude female in frontal position, standing upon a lion that strides forward. In these works the female has been identified as the Syrian goddess Qedesh shown centered between two Egyptian deities.⁵³ In each instance the goddess raises her arms and holds a different object in each hand, a plant in one and a snake in the other. Although they differ in their iconographic details and assigned dates, the nude goddesses on the stone monuments reveal similarities with the composite female on the British Museum plaque.

Owl: The unusual renderings of the large birds that frame the recumbent lions on the plaque are intended to be recognizable as owl-like. Van Buren accepts this identification, which leads her to identify the nude female figure as the “goddess-owl” aspect of Ishtar. Of interest, however, the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* translates the phrase describing *qadû* (owl): “the owl, the bird of Ea, cries *tukku-tukku*.”⁵⁴ This brief description suggests that a different deity was associated with the owl. Turning to the visual arts of the ancient Near East, one searches in vain for the representation of an owl. Indeed, no known examples of an owl exist, except on the unexcavated, unprovenienced British Museum plaque. Nonetheless, the two near-identical depictions of the bird merit discussion.

The rendering of the bird is composed of three separate elements: head, torso, and legs. As drawn, the large rounded head with round eyes is attached to the upper part of the torso, which is delineated as a poncho-like shape that also forms the wings (fig. 1). The body is covered with a scale pattern on the upper part, while the lower part forms a border filled with vertical lines, perhaps to indicate the feathered wings. Two long, thin legs with talon-like feet extend from the torso. The three knobby, finger-like claws on the talons of each bird touch the shallow platform and rest upon the front of the scale-patterned base of the plaque. Overall, the general appearance of the two birds seems awkward, and indeed is indicative of an almost simplistic caricature.

A comparison between the owls on the plaque with real owls reveals the craftsman’s lack of knowledge of the living variety and, therefore, his inability to depict an owl in a convincing manner. One telling detail is the beak. Centered on the face of each of the two birds is a continuous contour line that defines a damaged (accidental?) triangular surface rather than a beak; that is, narrow at the upper end and wide at the lower end. On the bird that is positioned at the female’s proper right side, a beak tip is attached to the lower end of the damaged area. In contrast, the same triangular area on the bird positioned at the female’s left side is filled in to indicate a shallow human-type nose with nostrils that are clearly visible. These details contrast with the beak of a living owl—or that of any bird of prey—whose broad upper bill starts between the eyes and tapers down to a sharp edge. In addition, the nostrils of a bird of prey are at the upper end of the beak. The craftsman’s inaccurate rendering of these essential features is significant. One would expect that the maker of a major iconographical plaque, who was capable of modeling the nude female with a considerable degree of expertise, had a basic understanding of how to represent and depict an owl or bird in general.

There are of course examples in ancient Near Eastern art that show a bird, either posed frontally or in side view, which disclose an ability to depict a bird convincingly. A primary

53. Pritchard 1969: 305–6, figs. 470–74. A nude frontal female, who stands upon two back-to-back seated lions with their heads turned back, is depicted on a seal design from Ras Shamra-Ugarit; see Schaeffer-Forrer 1983: 16–17.

54. CAD Q (1982), 51.

example of the frontal view is the Anzu (Zu) bird, mentioned previously. This bird-type, dated to the Ur III period, has its wings spread out from its body, as if in flight.⁵⁵ In Mesopotamian art it is characteristic for the wings of a bird to be attached to the sides of the body, however simplified may be its depiction. Moreover, the side view of a bird was the general method of representation in ancient Near Eastern art. Interest in depicting different types of birds seems to have increased during the second millennium, and later into the Neo-Assyrian period.⁵⁶ The owl is *not* among the identifiable birds represented in ancient Near Eastern art.

Lion: The turned heads of the two recumbent lions on the plaque conform to the composition's scheme of depicting the frontal view. The projecting portion of their respective heads is modeled in the round and is intact. Each lion has a closed mouth and a passive gaze. Excavated third-millennium B.C. parallels of a close-mouthed head of a lion modeled in the round include a stone mace-head from Tel Agrab decorated with projecting lion heads, a stone base from Susa, and from Telloh (ancient Girsu) the mace-head belonging to Gudea (ca. 2100 B.C.) and several isolated lion heads that originally decorated basins.⁵⁷ Also dated to the third millennium are depictions of a lion with an open mouth. Notable examples are the carved lions that decorate the throne of the seated statue of Ishtar from Susa, described above. Two stone recumbent lions from Susa are likewise rendered with open mouths.⁵⁸ The pair of Urkish lion pegs, one housed in the Louvre, the other in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, also portrays the animals with an open mouth as if snarling or roaring.⁵⁹ From the second millennium onwards this facial feature was standard for active lion representations in the art of Mesopotamia. It is not surprising that the ancient artist emphasized the fearsome expression of a lion, since this feature conveys effectively the notion of animation and animal power.

The head of each lion on the British Museum plaque has a mane covered with bitumen, which is patterned with incised lines. The foreground lion shows the hair of the mane extending across its underside, a feature of lions that occurs in cylinder seal representations of the Akkad and Middle Assyrian periods.⁶⁰ The extension of the mane to the underside of a male lion was a standard feature in the art of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Hittite periods.

Two details on the lions warrant further discussion. One is the rendering of their paws, three of which are depicted. The paws stretch outward and tilt toward the viewer. Consequently, the forepaw of the foreground lion displays six toes/claws, somewhat carelessly. This detail is unique since the forepaws of the living species have four toes/claws at the front, while the fifth is at the back. Turning to the visual arts of Mesopotamia, the toes/claws of the forepaws of a lion are extended only in animal battle scenes or in the royal hunt, thus intensifying the notion of stressful action; closed forepaws occur on an inactive,

55. Moortgat 1969: pls. 113, 117.

56. For a selection of representations of birds in ancient Near Eastern art, see: Moortgat 1969: pls. 120 (vulture), 287–88 (dove); Amiet 1980: figs. 11–14, 17 (eagle); Pritchard 1969: figs. 519–21 (falcon?); Schmökel 1959: Taf. 76 bottom (ostrich); Collon 1988: fig. 405 (ostrich).

57. See Moortgat 1969: 29, pl. 38; Amiet 1976: 43, 131, figs. 55, 56; Parrot 1969a: fig. 291; Parrot 1948: 195, fig. 42 h, k, m.

58. Amiet 1976: 131, figs. 59 a, b, 60.

59. Amiet 1976: 65, fig. 64 a, b. The two lion pegs are illustrated and discussed in Muscarella 1988a: 374–77; 1988b: 93–99, illus. 48–53. See now the excavated seal impression from Tell Mozan (ancient Urkish), which depicts a recumbent, open-mouthed lion at the feet of the seated king; G. Buccellati and M. Kelly-Buccellati 1997: 80–81.

60. Cf. Moortgat 1969: pls. F 3, K 2, 3.

occasionally recumbent lion.⁶¹ In Mesopotamian art the hind paws of a passive lion are always closed; but oddly, this is not the case with the visible hind paw of the foreground lion on the plaque.

The second detail is the ornamentation on the upper outer edge of the somewhat distorted foreleg of each lion.⁶² These differ from one another. On the shoulder of the mostly hidden background lion, a few short random striations frame a small button-like circle; on the shoulder of the foreground lion, a broad curved shape extends downwards from one side of the small button-like circle. The two different decorative motifs catch our interest, since a shoulder ornament sometimes occurs in Mesopotamian representations of lions. An early example of the shoulder ornament is that on the six lions carved on the statue of the seated goddess discovered at Susa, mentioned above. The same ornament is given to each lion; it has been described as resembling a knot or bow with a spiral display of its two extended attachments.⁶³ Another version of the shoulder ornament occurs on a fragmentary stone lion from Uruk, inscribed with the name of Gudea of Lagash.⁶⁴ It consists of a circle filled with curved radiating lines, and attached to each side is a downward-turned rectangular shape. A late-third-millennium B.C. copper lion discovered at Mari shows a shoulder ornament that consists of a circle filled with curved radiating lines.⁶⁵ The shoulder ornament on another copper lion and on a terracotta lion, both from Mari, is described as in the form of the sun.⁶⁶ Comparison between the two types of shoulder ornaments depicted on the British Museum plaque and the several versions cited here reveals a slight resemblance to those on the Susa and Uruk lions. Since the last-named lions are dated to the late third millennium B.C., we may suppose that the apparent resemblance is fortuitous.

CONCLUSION

One must acknowledge that the British Museum plaque, recently named "Queen of the Night," is impressive at first viewing. However, the above brief study dealing with the style and iconography of the plaque reveals many features that are unusual or unique when compared with excavated and provenienced Mesopotamian and Near Eastern art, primarily of the second millennium B.C. Moreover, the contradictions of iconographic imagery (e.g., goddess/female demon, lion/owl) within the figural grouping on the terracotta plaque have resulted in conflicting identifications by modern scholars. This too adds to the uniqueness of the plaque, and may indicate a real problem with its date and place of manufacture.

61. See Parrot 1961a: pl. 225 (Akkad period); Strommenger 1964: pls. 248–49 (Neo-Assyrian period). A rare exception to the rule of showing the closed hind paws of a lion in defensive posture occurs on two monumental wall reliefs from Khorsabad. There, a hero-type figure clutches to his body a roaring lion that struggles to free itself; see Albenda 1986: pls. 15, 17, figs. 7, 8. It may be noted that the tail of each obliquely positioned lion extends downward in a reverse s-curve, similar to the tail of the foreground lion on the British Museum plaque.

62. I find a curious similarity between the somewhat awkward renderings of the high-shoulder forelegs on the recumbent lions on the British Museum plaque and that of a dying lioness on the wall reliefs from room C of Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh. The wall reliefs were excavated in the mid-nineteenth century and transported a short time later to the British Museum. For good illustrations of the Nineveh lioness, see Parrot 1961b; Strommenger 1964, pl. 250.

63. Amiet 1976: 38.

64. Beyer et al. 1993: 100, fig. 20.

65. Beyer et al. 1993: 100–102, figs. 8 (bottom right), 21 b.

66. Beyer et al. 1993: fig. 21 a. For bibliography on the subject of shoulder ornaments on lions, see Beyer et al. 1993: n. 28.

Comparison between excavated objects and the British Museum plaque makes it evident that the selection and arrangement of the subject matter on the plaque has no known parallels. However, the theme of a goddess with birds is represented on terracotta plaques discovered at Telloh, Nippur, and Ur. These depict the seated or standing goddess, identified variously as Gula, Bau (Baba), and Nanše, and large geese.⁶⁷ The flounced robe worn by the individual goddesses is an item of dress that dates these plaques to the third millennium B.C. The representation of a bird with spread wings held in the hand of a goddess occurs in a second-millennium seal design, and on a terracotta plaque from Alalakh the nude goddess Šaušga is depicted with a bird (dove?) in each upraised hand.⁶⁸ Thus in the visual arts, where there is a direct association between a goddess and bird(s), the bird represented is never identifiable as an owl. Relevant to the matter of similar or related motifs is Van Buren's assumption that the two recumbent lions depicted on the British Museum plaque match up with those shown on the Yale plaque. That supposed parallel should now be dismissed. I have demonstrated that the latter plaque must be dated to the first millennium B.C., rather than to the Old Babylonian period. Moreover, the frontal heads of the lions on the British Museum plaque find their closest parallels with excavated examples dated to the late third millennium B.C.

In the ancient Near East divine or human figures are set atop an animal or upon a base-line, but do not overlap in mid-air, as is the case with the composite female on the British Museum plaque. And the depictions of the two owls portray little more than an awkward caricature of the living variety, whereas the ancient artist or craftsman was capable of depicting a bird with a degree of correctness. The fleshy nude body of the composite female is the major contemporary attraction to the plaque, but to me this rendering looks "modern," when compared with other nude females portrayed on terracotta plaques of the second millennium B.C. I may add that the female's hollow eyes, which evoke a strange stare, are quite unusual since there is archaeological evidence that terracotta human/deity figurines were molded with filled-in eyes.

A serious problem with the British Museum plaque is that early on it was in the possession of an antiquities dealer, i.e., without an archaeological locus. However, one should not overlook the results of the 1935 chemical analysis and the 1975 thermoluminescence tests undertaken by the British Museum on two separate occasions. Unfortunately, the results of these tests have merely been cited and never published. The cited TL tests indicate a broad range of dates for the clay that forms the *background surface upon which* the figural subject matter was modeled. It is my view that the figural relief *itself* must be studied as an artifact on its own terms, independent of the chemical analysis and TL tests elsewhere. The significance of the stated chemical analysis of the plaque remains vague with regard to the specific period of its antiquity; an artificial "aging" process could have been known and applied.⁶⁹ Therefore, I believe a scientific re-examination of the plaque is necessary.

In this study I have followed recognized art-historical methods. Accordingly, analysis of the subject matter makes it clear to me that the British Museum plaque presents a pastiche

67. See Parrot 1948: 239, pl. 49 c; Legrain 1930: 28, no. 212; Maxwell-Hyslop 1992: 79–82, pls. vii–ix. For a version of the same motif on a seal design, see Moortgat 1940: 108, no. 273. On two other seals (nos. 269, 270) a frontal bird in flight appears just above the extended hand of the enthroned goddess. The text of *Nanše and the Birds* begins with the mention of the goose, and the list of birds that follows does not include the owl. See Veldhuis 2004: 4–5, 117–22.

68. Collon 1987: 73, no. 318; Alexander 1991: 168–69, fig. 4.

69. Of interest is the method that has been used to fake African terracotta animals, many of which have been acquired by private collectors and museums; see Brent 2001b: 26–32.

of artistic features and motifs observable in excavated and unprovenanced ancient Near Eastern art objects that were known in the early 1930s. Some of the objects had already been published; others entered museums and were therefore available to interested individuals. Added to the borrowings of ideas were others coming from "modern invention"; the paired owls are a prime example. However extraordinary the so-called "Queen of the Night" plaque must appear, I continue to be unconvinced of its antiquity. I am even less inclined to believe that it represents a major work of the Old Babylonian period.⁷⁰

70. Unexcavated and unprovenanced objects sometimes give rise to fictitious storytelling surrounding their alleged antiquity and place of origin. For example, see Simpson 2005.

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ADDENDUM

The following British Museum booklet came to my attention several months after this article was accepted for publication: D. Collon, *The Queen of the Night* (London, 2005). The author states "although originally Plenderleith had thought that bitumen was used for the background, more recent analysis has shown that charcoal and soot were used not only for the background, but also for the Queen's hair and eyebrows, for the manes of the lions and for the scale pattern at the bottom of the relief. A gypsum pigment was used for the white bodies of the lions" (p. 17). With regard to the identification of charcoal and soot, this contradicts the British Museum letter of 1995 (see n. 6) stating, "the exhaustive chemical analysis . . . has established . . . bitumen dried out in a way which is only possible in the course of centuries." It is odd that Plenderleith erred between bitumen and charcoal. Moreover, Frankfort *never* mentions that white paint occurred on the bodies of the lions, nor elsewhere on the plaque. He does note that the feathers alternate in red and black. One wonders how Frankfort overlooked the evidence of the white pigment, if indeed the 1935 chemical analysis had recorded its presence. If white pigment was *not* recorded, one may then surmise that repainting occurred sometime after 1936. Therefore, to clarify the above issues, the documentation of both the early and recent chemical analyses of the "Queen of the Night" plaque should be published as soon as possible.