

THE REVISION OF BABYLONIAN ANTI-WITCHCRAFT
INCANTATIONS: THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
INCANTATIONS IN THE CEREMONIAL SERIES *MAQLÛ**

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall try to shed some further light on modes of revision of Akkadian incantations. Individual incantations were not static and often took on more than one form. We know of the existence of these forms through several means. Sometimes, we actually have extant variant forms of an incantation that are similar enough to indicate a genetic relationship but sufficiently different to suggest that they had separate identities.¹ In other instances, internal tensions or inconsistencies in a text suggest that the preserved text was produced by the revision of an earlier version. In the latter instance, we establish the existence of different forms of the text by means of a critical analysis that focuses primarily upon the aforementioned internal tensions or inconsistencies.

Elsewhere, I have compared extant forms of individual incantations (and expect to do so again).² Here, I shall discuss some results obtained through critical analysis of incantations in the Akkadian magical series *Maqlû*, "Burning." This series is the longest and most important Mesopotamian composition concerned with combating witchcraft; its text served as the script of a ceremonial performance. *Maqlû* contains a

* This paper was first drafted while I was a member of the Institute for Advanced Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, during the spring and summer of 2006. I am grateful to the institute and its staff for their support and hospitality, to the other members of the research group "Occult Powers and Officiants in Near Eastern Cultures" for their collegiality, and to Brandeis University for supplementary support. Versions of this paper were read at the institute's conference "Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition," Jerusalem, July 2006, as well as at the 217th meeting of the American Oriental Society, San Antonio, 2007.

¹ In some instances, we must try to determine whether the differences are no more than performance or aesthetic variants.

² See, e.g., my *Babylonian Witchcraft Literature: Case Studies*, BJS 132, (Atlanta, 1987 [a revised version of my 1972 Harvard dissertation]), pp. 9–44 (see below).

ritual tablet and eight incantation tablets that record the text of almost one hundred incantations directed against witches and witchcraft. The present form of the text seems to be a creation of the early first millennium BCE, the standard long text having developed from an earlier short form by means of a series of sequential changes. A critical examination of many of the incantations in *Maqlû* (as in other Mesopotamian series, collections, and shorter rituals) would produce interesting literary and/or textual results, but those on which we focus our attention here were re-studied recently because of problems encountered during the latest stage of editing and translating the series.³ In the course of this recent work, a number of incantations were subjected anew to critical analysis; this close and detailed study led to some new results as well as to the confirmation of some earlier impressions.

I shall present here only a few of these results. I shall discuss two incantations that may be said to have undergone expansion. These incantations contain interpolations that enumerate evil forces or destructive actions associated with the witch. These interpolations are in the form of lists, and their inclusion is marked off by repetitive resumptions.⁴

The reconstruction of stages of development of an incantation through critical analysis starts from the premise that an incantation should and will normally exhibit a coherence of thought and congruence between its parts. Such qualities are to be expected of relatively short literary works produced by a single composer. But sometimes a single incantation contains multiple motifs, sections, or just lines that are not wholly congruent, that are repetitive and/or awkward, that may even be contradictory, or that are at home in different incantation types or compositions. The mixture of non-congruent materials should usually be understood as a consequence of development or alteration.⁵

³ Whereas in previous studies, I followed the line division and count in the edition of *Maqlû* by G. Meier, *Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû*, AfO Beiheft 2 (Berlin, 1937), and "Studien zur Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû," AfO 21 (1966): 71–81, in this study I follow the line count of my own forthcoming edition; this new line count has now been used also in T. Abusch and D. Schwemer, "Das Abwehrzauberritual *Maqlû* ('Verbrennung')," in B. Janowski and G. Wilhelm, (eds.), *Omina, Orakel, Rituale und Beschwörungen*, Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments, Neue Folge 4 (Gütersloh, 2008), pp. 128–186.

⁴ For an alternative hypothesis regarding the formation of these incantations, see the final paragraphs of this paper.

⁵ See my "Water into Fire: The Formation of Some Witchcraft Incantations," *Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Towards a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature*, AMD 5 (Leiden, 2002), pp. 197–198.