



J. Cale Johnson, ed.

Patients and Performative Identities: At the Intersection of the Mesopotamian Technical Disciplines and Their Clients

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It is unusual for a collection of essays garnered from conference talks to be as coherent in subject matter as is the present volume. Cale Johnson's introductory first chapter manages to find all the relevant strands connecting the contributions by focusing on Mesopotamian medicine, magic, and divination as technical disciplines and how this approach can compensate for the lack of personal narratives revealing how these disciplines were applied in individual circumstances. Not only was rhetoric lacking from the Mesopotamian academic curriculum, in contrast to the classical world, but there was no comparable genre of Mesopotamian theater—either tragedy or comedy—to reflect how individuals were influenced or affected by the powerful psychology of magic, the physical effects of drugs, or the emotional impact of forecasting the future. As Cale Johnson mentions, the one comic narrative that stands out is *The Poor Man of Nippur*, showing that Akkadian writers and listeners were receptive to comic parodies, but we remain in the dark regarding how such a colorful text may have been staged or presented. Nevertheless, we know from this text how an outrageously bold protagonist, Gimil-Ninurta, adopts costumes and disguises to confound and punish the dimwitted mayor of Nippur, a city known for its venerable tradition of scholarship and literary productivity. As the introduction points out (4), this text is a “burlesque of formal practices” providing some insight into how professionals treated their patients or clients.

Three of the chapters are devoted to an important group of incantations and rituals known as *Entering the Palace* (designated only by its Sumerian label, É.GAL.KU4.RA), which provides colorful, sometimes graphically blood-curdling, and occasionally even amusing incantations and

rituals against rivals and perceived enemies. These magical machinations can involve the equivalent of modern voodoo dolls pierced with needles or elaborate rituals with scatological use of figurines and incantations that declare that the unnamed rival is “not allowed to fart.” Apart from cursing enemies, these incantations were also aimed at bolstering the courage of the owner of the incantation while confronting bosses or rulers, or for a wife to deal with an angry husband. According to JoAnn Scurlock’s remarks (ch. 2), these É.GAL.KU4.RA incantations were intended to “calm anger, win friends and influence people” (24). Scurlock’s epigrammatic observation is not entirely arbitrary but reflects the still-popular 1936 publication of Dale Carnegie’s book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, aimed at teaching Americans how to influence others by cajoling rather than confronting them. Scurlock is correct in noting similar advice being offered by these ancient rituals, which attempt to enhance one’s own position or diminish rivalry by the secretive and subtle use of magic. This is a point also taken up in a detailed essay by Ulrike Steinert (ch. 4) in this volume, who goes further by comparing the Akkadian praxis with corresponding Greek magic involving binding and love spells, picturesque curses, and its own brand of voodoo dolls. Marvin Schreiber (ch. 3) takes a somewhat different view of É.GAL.KU4.RA in relation to hemerologies and zodiacal influences, showing how these rituals were so regularly applied that they could be tracked calendrically. Netanel Anor’s comments (ch. 5) further emphasizes the involvement of the client in helping to forecast his own future prospects through divination, which mirrors what we see in these É.GAL.KU4.RA incantations and rituals.

There is, however, a fly in the ointment. Steinert’s chapter attempts to uncover personalities behind these magical acts, while Scurlock is concerned with the veracity of accusations against an adversary, with the danger of false accusations rebounding against the initiator of the magical procedure. Steinert meanwhile scrupulously notes the parallels to É.GAL.KU4.RA incantations in the Akkadian antiwitchcraft corpus (66–67). In Scurlock’s view of this connection, if the client who employed this magic falsely accused his opponent in a direct confrontation, he could be “in big trouble,” but merely accusing his enemy of trying to behex him was relatively harmless, thus “avoiding falling off the edge into witchcraft, itself not only morally wrong but legally actionable” (25). Both of these discussions miss a relevant point: the psychology behind É.GAL.KU4.RA spells and rituals. The point is quite simple: actual witches are not required for one to believe in witchcraft. The anonymous character of these incantations and rituals, both in terms of client and adversary (the *bēl dabābi* who later becomes a demonic figure) is an essential part of this process. It is not necessary to know who the specific rival or enemy might be, since it could potentially be anyone in the bureaucratic or social environment of the client. The owner of the spell might have his or her suspicions, but the spell would apply to anyone who wished him or her ill. In more personal cases of calming anger, in which a woman is thinking of her spouse, or in love incantations, what we have from Mesopotamia are the model spells belonging to the *āšipu*-exorcist rather than to the client, which would have had to come from private houses rather than civic archives. This contrasts with the situation in numerous Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls from private houses, which

provide the names of the owners of the bowls as well as the personal names of a rival or adversary being cursed; see Siam Bhayro's general discussion of first-person adjurations in magic bowls (ch. 7) as well as Dan Levene's *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (2013).

Strahil Panayotov's important description (ch. 6) of the iconography of the sickbed scene shows the probable collegiality of the *āšipu*-exorcist and *asû*-physician operating together to treat the patient both physically and psychologically (see Panayotov's drawing on 150). Such rituals grew in popularity and may have influenced even medical practices, such as the use of the *sikilla*-plant to counter witchcraft, as pointed out by Madelina Rumor (ch. 8), while also highlighting similar uses of a Greek plant by the same name.

Another feature of these É.GAL.KU4.RA incantations and rituals is that they represent an innovation, lacking either earlier Sumerian counterparts or even Akkadian prototypes from the Old Babylonian period, that had its own rich heritage of similar kinds of folk magic, but nothing of this specific character (see now N. Wasserman and E. Zomer, *Akkadian Magic Literature: Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations; Corpus-Context-Praxis*, 2022). The importance of this volume is the clarity of the presentations in describing technical disciplines that were not frozen in time but were being adapted to new discoveries (e.g., the zodiac) and new cosmopolitan influences within the broader world of Mediterranean antiquity.

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