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# The Lamashtu Amulet: A Portrait of the Caregiver as a Demoness\*

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Chalcedony amulet depicting the Lamashtu demoness, probably ca. second millennium BCE

Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (HMANE) no. SM 1949.03.002.  
Accession no. 08985 (SM catalogue: 3178).

Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) no. P408053

The massacre did not succeed the first time. So the gods tried again and again—beginning with the instrument of contagion and plague, and cycling through the usual options of drought and famine—until they hit upon what seemed to be the final and perfect solution: to drown out the noise of humans, quite literally, by submerging the world under water. These events come down to us in the *Atrahasis* myth, also popularly known as the *Babylonian Flood Story*.<sup>[1]</sup> The more famous version is in the Hebrew Bible, where Noah and his family shelter in place within that refugee boat called an ark.<sup>[2]</sup> As it happened in the Mesopotamian story, the few survivors of the postdiluvian world could not adequately sustain the economy and culture, nor could they offer sufficient worship and sacrifice. The gods came to the realization that interventions in the human population should never again be made without restraint, by the broad brushstrokes of contagion or climate change.<sup>[3]</sup> And so the Lamashtu<sup>[4]</sup> demoness found her *raison d'être* as one who would enforce a kind of birth control, by selectively snatching away babies from their mother's womb or cradling arms.<sup>[5]</sup>

Now then, let there be a third (kind of woman) among the people.

Among the people are the woman who has given birth  
and the woman who has not.  
Let there be (also) among the people “She who effaces” [6]—  
let her seize the baby from the lap of her who gave birth (to it)!  
Establish high priestesses and priestesses—  
let them be taboo (i.e., celibate), and so reduce childbirth!

– *Atrahasis (Old Babylonian version) III vii 1–7*[7]

A crude mathematical logic governed the new demographics. Additions by birth and non-contributions because of infertility or celibacy, on the human side of the ledger, were to be balanced out by subtractions of infant lives claimed by the demoness. Deaths from old age were omitted from the calculus, perhaps reflective of traditions that humans lived an exceptionally long time before and immediately after the great Flood—as apparent in the regnal years of Mesopotamian kings of yore that numbered into the tens of thousands.[8] Large-scale decimations from wars seem also not to figure into the equation, maybe under the conceit that such events occurred only through divine instigation, in an interpretation that reversed the cause-and-effect of human battles whose victories were credited to the gods. The burden of implementing the divine scheme of population planning, in any case, fell particularly to women—even though there was no reason *a priori* that a baby-snatcher had to be female. Indeed, the complicated implications of Lamashtu’s femininity are at the forefront of her depiction in ancient magic amulets designed to ward away the demoness. Recovered from sites in modern Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and beyond, close to a hundred specimens of such amulets have found their way into museums and private collections worldwide—including the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, which, up until recently, was named the Harvard Semitic Museum.[9]



**Figure 1a. Chalcedony amulet of height (including the protrusion) 65 mm × width 48 mm, depicting the Lamashtu demoness with a bird's head, a crooked beak, a crest of feathers, and arms and fingers stretched out. She is flanked by a pig on the left and a dog on the right. On the left, the bent leg of a donkey appears above her arm, a giant centipede within reach of her fingers, and a comb below her elbow. On the right, a pin or needle is positioned above her arm, and below the arm is an arrow shape representing a spindle.**



**Figure 1b.** The amulet's opposite side contains five lines of a magic spell incised in cuneiform script. Stylistically, a Type I.2 amulet (Götting 2009) probably dated to the second millennium BCE. Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (HMANE) no. SM 1949.03.002. Accession no. 08985 (SM catalogue: 3178). Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) no. P408053.

**Figure 2b.** 3D model of Lamashtu amulet: <https://sketchfab.com/3d->

models/lamashtu-plaque-d7bbc11b2ddf403b8e1ef1883ad75612

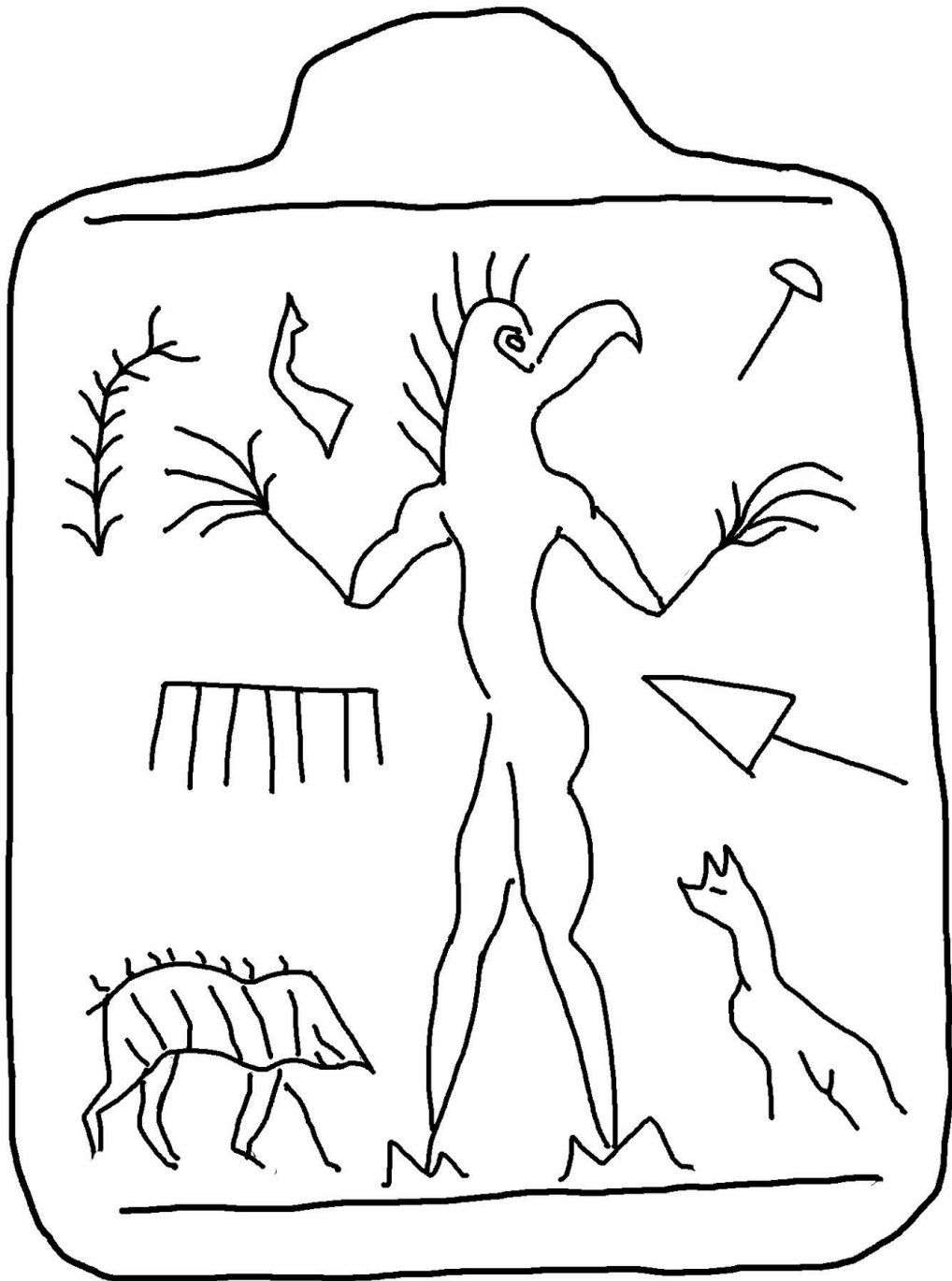


Figure 3a. Hand drawing of the incisions in Figure 1a by John Z. Wee.

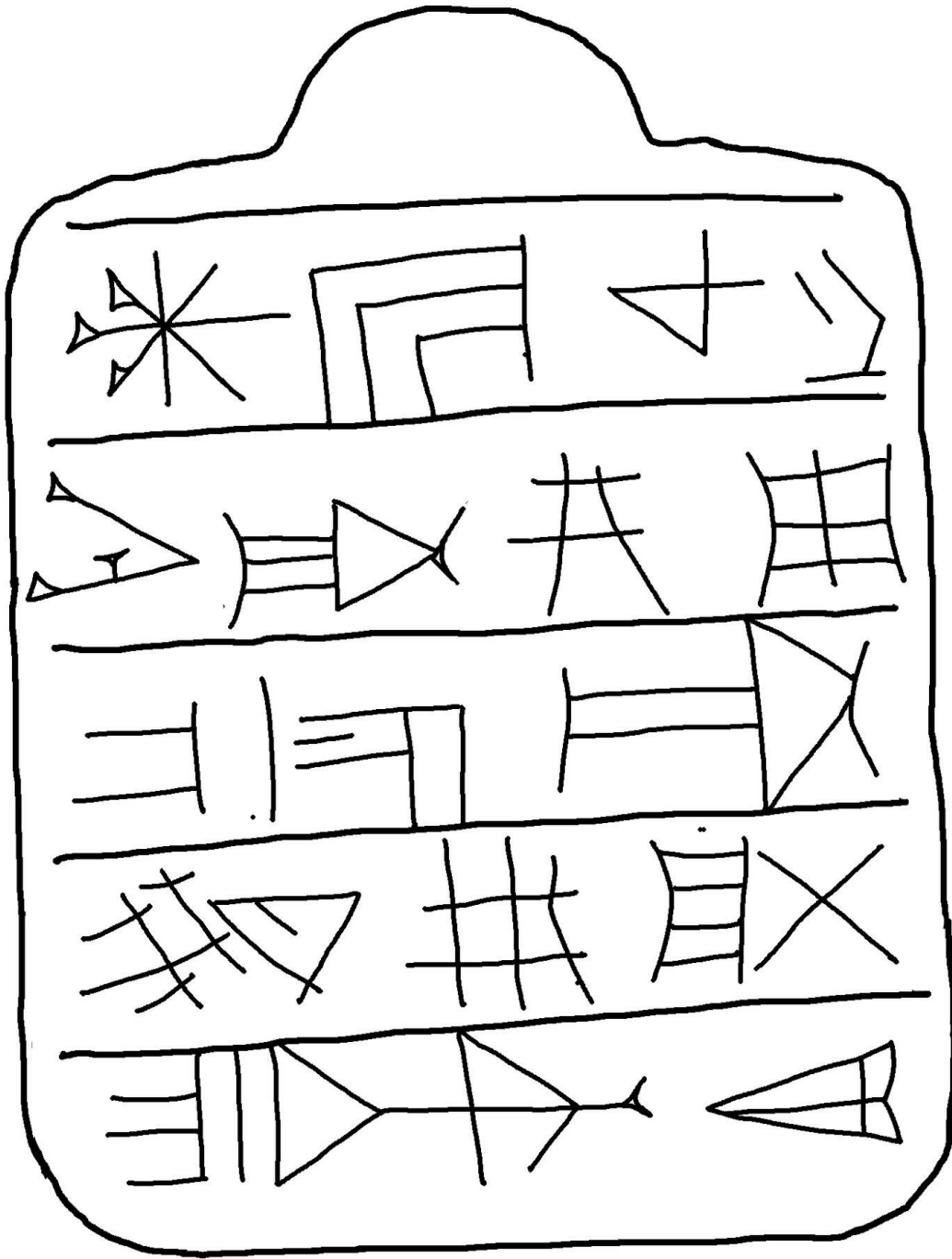


Figure 3b. Hand drawing of fig. 1b by John Z. Wee.

The Lamashtu amulet displayed above (figs. 1-3) was purchased by the Harvard museum for \$125 and received on October 25, 1949 from the dealer Albert S. David, during the curatorship of Robert Henry Pfeiffer (1931-1958).[10] Intermittent closures

of the museum to the public suggest that this was a period of turbulence, which unfortunately also contributed to poor documentation of records. It is unclear whether the amulet was on display in the museum's exhibit galleries, though after Pfeiffer's unexpected death, it was certainly moved into storage along with all other artifacts, where it was used as a teaching aid and made accessible to visiting researchers by prior arrangement. The protrusion at the top of this object is characteristic of Mesopotamian amulets, even though, like many such specimens, this one lacks a hole through which it might be suspended from a cord or necklace. The amulet's shallow incised relief is not easily discernable using normal photography (figs. 1a–b), but monochrome images captured using an Artec 3D Space Spider scanner (fig. 2a) allow us to manipulate the digitized object under a digital light source, so as to view its surface in greater detail from different positions and angles (fig. 2b).

Amulets of this type from the second millennium BCE quite commonly bear pseudo-inscriptions of what were intended to be magic spells, which attempt to mimic the script and features of cuneiform writing but which make little or disjointed linguistic sense.[11] At other times, it becomes evident that ancient craftsmen of these amulets did not understand the lines and shapes they were chiseling into stone, as when they omitted cuneiform signs from originally-readable texts.[12] Written textual forms, then—in addition to any oral recitations of these spells—were manifestly regarded as important elements of ancient magic and ritual, even if appearing only abstractly or emblematically on these amulets. On the Harvard amulet, the five-line inscription represents an incantation, even though the introductory rubric “spell” (line 1) is written in an atypical fashion, in addition to other unconventional or archaizing sign forms (figs. 1b and 3b).[13] As implied by the ritual instructions below, however, the amulet's surface prominently displayed to the ancient viewer—and the demoness herself—was likely to be the portrait on the opposite side of the incantation. In creating a hand drawing of this portrait (fig. 3a), the modern artist inadvertently steps into an ancient role, retracing the skilled motions of ancient magicians who meticulously crafted tableaux of animals and objects in their own drawings of Lamashtu, which were essential in rituals to exorcise the demoness:

When you perform the ritual against Lamashtu,

    you draw the Daughter of Anu[14] ( at ) the right side of the door, the left side of the door,

    or in the direction of the entrance to the bedroom.

To the right and left of the Daughter of Anu,

    you draw a dog, a pig, a lamp, a scorpion, [a spindle], a comb, a mirror, (and) the lower

    leg of a donkey.

You have her grasp snakes in her hands.



– *Canonical Lamashtu Series (First Millennium BCE) III 1–7*[15]

The sources on Lamashtu, in fact, provide a remarkable window into the complex interplay of meanings among ancient images and texts, and histories of interpretation that traverse centuries, even for durations of more than a millennium. We can learn much, especially, by comparing the schematic images on the Harvard amulet with depictions of the demoness on other amulets that employ a more realistic style, such as the ones below from the Louvre (fig. 4) and the British Museum (fig. 5).[16]

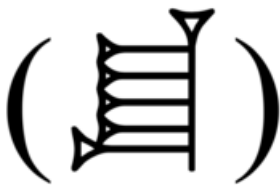


**Figure 4. Obsidian amulet of height (including the protrusion, excluding the damaged bottom) 41 mm × width 39 mm. The Lamashtu demoness is portrayed as having a bird's head with crooked beak, a feathered crest, plumage on the chest, and arms outstretched, each with six fingers fanned outwards. She is flanked by a pig on the left (image partially damaged), and most probably a dog in the damaged portion on the right. On the left, a round bottom vessel and a pin or needle appears above her arm, and a comb below it. On the right, the bent leg of a donkey is depicted above her arm, and below the arm are two arrow shapes representing two spindles. The cuneiform inscription preserved along the top, right, and left borders is a citation of *zi—pad3* magic incantations in the Sumerian language. Stylistically, a Type 1.2 amulet (Götting 2009) probably dated to the second millennium BCE. The Louvre Museum no. AO 8184. Image courtesy of the photographer © Gina Konstantopoulos.**

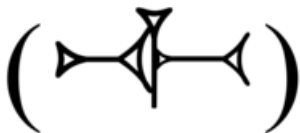


Figure 5. Gray-green stone amulet of height (including the protrusion) 127 mm × width 62 mm. The Lamashtu demoness appears with a lion’s head and mane, bird talons for feet, and is perched atop a running donkey. A pig and a dog suckle at her breasts. Each of her hands grasps a snake, and another snake is wrapped as a belt around her waist. On the left, an oil lamp is depicted above her arm, and below the arm is a spindle with whorl. On the right, a round bottom vessel is positioned above her arm, below which are a comb and a pin or needle. Stylistically, a Type III.2.1 amulet (Götting 2009) probably dated to the first millennium BCE. British Museum no. BM 117759. Registration no. 1925,0715.1. Purchased by Leonard Woolley in 1925 from Carchemish funds. Asset no. 32627001: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/32627001>. Image released under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The image on the Louvre amulet (fig. 4) is immediately relatable but for its nuanced portraiture of Lamashtu, which illuminates features scarcely distinguishable on the Harvard amulet—including her bird’s head with vulture-like lappets creasing her face, her sharply angled hooked beak, the fine striations of her crest feathers running all the way down the back of her neck, her plumage of chest feathers that obscure any female breasts and contribute to the overall impression of an androgynous figure, and her fingers straining to extend outwards like a fan, six to a hand, each tipped with an arched claw. Other features are also articulated in greater detail, like the matted bristles on the pig’s back and the donkey’s bent leg that terminates in a hoof. An enhanced appeal is made to the viewer’s sense of the tactile, by the luxuriously curved forms of the pin’s head and the round bottom vessel, and by the corrugated surface of the comb’s handle.[17] Curiously, the spindles continue to be depicted as abstract arrow shapes, perhaps because, as some suggest, such schematic forms lend themselves more easily to being visualized as a kind of weapon directed against the demoness.[18] Or, as I would propose, the frequent pairing of a comb and an arrow shape may have ideographic significance in the ritual context of Lamashtu amulets.[19] The comb evokes the form of the cuneiform sign šu



, which, together with the arrow-shaped sign



, creates the Sumerian verb šu-teĝ4(“to accept”)[20]—in an

expression of the wish uttered during ritual that the demoness would “accept from the woodworker a comb, a spindle, and a pin befitting your threads!”[21]

According to the typology worked out by Götting (2009), the iconography of both Harvard and Louvre amulets belongs to Type I.2, exemplars of which harken from

southern Mesopotamia and can be dated to the second millennium BCE during the Old or Middle Babylonian period.[22] By the first millennium BCE, Lamashtu was portrayed consistently with a lion's head and a woman's body, while retaining the trait of bird talons for feet—as illustrated by the amulet from the British Museum (fig. 5).[23] The appearance of androgyny was conveyed this time through the juxtaposition of the lion's mane, more characteristic of the male,[24] and female breasts that suckle the pig and dog. While the status of these domesticated animals in earlier images (figs. 3a and 4) can be ambiguous to the modern viewer, they were now co-opted as actors in a make-believe farce of maternal care (fig. 5), and—as part of a tableau that often included venomous creatures like snakes, scorpions, and giant centipedes (*Scolopendra*)—took the place of the human infant as victims of Lamashtu's poisonous breast milk.[25] A similar role was performed by the donkey, whose relevance is merely implied by its detached lower leg in the Harvard and Louvre amulets (figs. 3a and 4), but whose full significance becomes apparent in first millennium BCE depictions of Lamashtu kneeling or standing upon a donkey (fig. 5) and/or on a boat that carries the demoness along streams leading to the Mesopotamian Netherworld.[26] Loosely analogous to the function of a scapegoat in the Hebrew Bible,[27] the running donkey served as a decoy that dragged Lamashtu away by means of her own talons sunken deep into the equid's back—thus turning the tables on her by taking advantage of her well-known *modus operandi* of ambushing and clutching onto her prey.

She is fierce, fearsome, divine;

she is a leopard, the Daughter of Anu is a she-wolf.

Among the sassum-grass are her dwelling places,

among the alfalfa is her bedding.

She intercepts the running youth, she disposes of the hurrying son.

(As for the manner of) his capture,[28]

she utterly smashes the tiny ones,

she makes the mature ones drink fetal water (i.e., amniotic fluid). [29]

– *Old Assyrian (OA<sub>1</sub>) Lamashtu Incantation, lines 1–16*[30]

This particular crime scene concerns a stillbirth, though Lamashtu is credited elsewhere for inflicting ailments on young children and even adults as well.[31] Here, the demoness lies in wait to seize upon the unsuspecting victim that rushes by, like a leopard or she-wolf hidden in the dense grass—in what could be an allusion to the thicket of pubic hair at the exit of the birth canal, through which a newborn cannot avoid passing.[32] Due to their deformed appearance, underdeveloped fetuses were compared to sufferers of severe physical violence; but more mature fetuses, which were indistinguishable from normal births at least outwardly, could be imagined to

have died by drowning in amniotic fluid.[33] Revealingly, the atypical word for “leopard” (*nammarat*) in this Old Assyrian incantation is replaced in an Old Babylonian version with “Amorite woman” (*Amurrât*), referring probably to a native of lands west of the Euphrates;[34] and the comparison of the demoness to yet other foreigners—a “Sutaeen” also from the west, or an “Elamite woman” (*Elamât*) from the Iranian plateau to the east—confirms the employment of xenophobic tropes as fuel for the terror ascribed to Lamashtu.[35] Not merely were outsiders regarded as vectors of harm, the pathogenic agent herself was foreign in origin.

The otherness of Lamashtu, moreover, manifested itself in her transgression of female norms. From what we know about gendered roles in ancient Mesopotamia, a markedly feminine character defined many of the objects offered to her in ritual—the comb, the spindle, the garment pin or sewing needle, and yet others depicted in amulets besides ours here (figs. 3–5), like a fibula pin and a mirror. These accessories and toiletries comprised the “travel kit” for Lamashtu’s exile by donkey or boat; and, in fact, physical exemplars of these items have been found in graves together with human burials of the first and second millennia BCE, serving the same purpose of ensuring that the departed would have a smooth and unimpeded journey to the Netherworld.[36] As emblems of interests and activities considered typical of women’s lives, they seem especially ill-suited for Lamashtu; and the expectation that she *would* accept these objects appears to have been founded on the value judgment that, as a woman, she *should*. In fact, whether through the non-utility of female breasts—inconspicuous or poisonous—or the incongruity of a lion’s mane, androgyny for the demoness functioned as the physical instantiation of her deficiencies in maternal feeling and womanly affection.[37] Displayed at doorways to female spaces used for prenatal preparations or postpartum convalescence, the Lamashtu amulet embodied for women a set of values oriented around childbirth and the nurture of the young—with the corresponding tendency, therefore, to view infant illness and death categorically as failures in female care-giving.

Her feet are (those of) the Anzû-bird, her hands (spread) defilement;  
her face takes the appearance of a ferocious lion. [38]

She arose out of the marshes, with her hair hanging loose, her underwear snipped off.

...

(Lamashtu said:) “Bring me your sons that I may suckle (them),  
and your daughters that I may nurse (them),  
that I may place my breast in the mouth of your daughters!”

The god Ea, her father,[39] heard her and (said:)

“Instead of playing the nurse, O Daughter of Anu,  
you should learn humaneness.[40]

Instead of your hands engaged in the flesh and blood (of child delivery),  
instead of going in and out of (other people's) houses,  
accept from the merchant his hem [41] and travel provisions,  
accept from the smith bracelets befitting your hands and feet,  
accept from the jeweler earrings befitting your ears,  
accept from the gem-cutter a carnelian (necklace) befitting your neck,  
accept from the woodworker a comb, a spindle, and a pin befitting your threads!"

– “RA”: *The Incantation Thureau-Dangin (Late Babylonian) lines 3–5, 10–21*[42]

Although not a (true) physician, she wraps with bandages,  
although not a (true) midwife, she wipes the baby clean.  
She keeps count of the months of the pregnant woman,  
cloistering off the doors of women about to give birth.

– *Old Babylonian (OB<sub>2</sub>) Lamashtu Incantation, lines 3–6*[43]

The many portraits of Lamashtu can be framed as one of those riddles whose solution derives its punch from the misleading language of its premise: “I am the woman who intrudes into homes not her own, who incarcerates those already burdened with pregnancy, whose hands are stained with the gore of newborns, who intimately touches and handles other people’s babies with impunity, and who so obsessively nurses infants that a modern diagnostician may well suspect a case of Munchausen syndrome by proxy—what am I?” The answer: “A demoness,” but also “a physician, midwife, or wet-nurse”[44] who worked with precarious urgency in a time without many of the modern safeguards against high infant mortality. Adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion that pries beneath the surface of the ancient text or image, sinister depictions of malice and malpractice begin to look to us more and more like standard scenarios of caregiving, but viewed retrospectively through the perverting lens of an infant’s sickness or death. The story of Lamashtu, then, can be recognized as an iteration of narratives about witches. Particularly in ancient Mesopotamia, anti-witchcraft incantations and rituals portray the witch as working her magic upon the victim by means of “feeding, giving drink, washing, and salving”—precisely the sorts of socially intrusive actions one might expect a caregiver to perform for the sick, and which, in cases where healing did not occur as expected, might eventually come to be regarded with cynicism and resentment.[45]

As a matter of fact, in other incantations against *Evil Spirits*, adjurations against the Lamashtu demoness are made in almost the same breath as those against “a wet-nurse,” whose status as human or demon is deliberately left ambiguous.[46] Mesopotamian laws, moreover, publicized fears of what could accrue when a wet-nurse lacked genuine womanly affection for her charge—that she may allow the baby

to die from negligence, while secretly breastfeeding another child at the same time for extra profit; or that she may hold an infant hostage or sell it as a slave, in retaliation for defaulted wages.[47] But perhaps most insidiously, the portrait of the caregiver as Lamashtu was one founded on slivers of truths, and which received its resonance from them. Even the best-intentioned woman could have been vulnerable to episodes of postpartum depression and feelings of maternal rejection, or to malaise due to breastfeeding that is diagnosed today under labels such as “dysphoric milk ejection reflex” or “nursing aversion.” For the caregiver burdened with guilt that sprung from these intractable emotions and reactions, an amulet-shaped mirror stood hanging by the bedroom door, with a recognizable monster reflected within.

## Notes

\* *A Note on Periodization*: Referring to the south of ancient Mesopotamia as “Babylonia” and the north as “Assyria,” this essay broadly follows the so-called Middle Chronology in its labels of “Old Assyrian” (2000–1750 BCE), “Old Babylonian” (1900–1500 BCE), “Middle Assyrian / Babylonian” (1500–1000 BCE), “Neo-Assyrian” (1000–600 BCE), and “Late Babylonian” (600 BCE to the Common Era). Texts and objects may be assigned to a region or time period based on the archaeological provenance of their manuscripts or exemplars, or their linguistic features and styles of cuneiform script and iconography.

[1] An English translation of *Atrahasis* with additional bibliography may be found in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2005), 227–80; with the relevant lines describing the above events of plague, drought, famine, and flood listed on pp. 228–29. For cuneiform editions of the myth, see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); A. R. George and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, “Tablets from the Sippar Library VI. Atra-ḫasīs,” *Iraq* 58 (1996): 147–90.

[2] Genesis, 6–9.

[3] On the theme of population control, see William L. Moran, “The Creation of Man in Atrahasis I 192–248,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 200 (1970): 56; Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, “The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and Its Solution as Reflected in the Mythology,” *Orientalia, Nova Series* 41, no. 2 (1972): 160–76.

[4] The name Lamashtu has been rendered by modern authors also with the alternative spellings *Lamashtum*, *Lamaštu*, and *Lamaštum*. For a survey of the textual and iconographic evidence pertaining to the demoness, her activities, and counter



measures against her, see F. A. M. Wiggermann, “Lamaštu, Daughter of Anu. A Profile,” in M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 217–49; and W. Farber, “Lamaštu,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 6 (1980–1983): 439–46. So that the reader might conveniently locate most of the texts relevant to this essay in one modern publication, I cite the cuneiform edition with its modern labels for the various Lamashtu incantations by Walter Farber, *Lamaštu: An Edition of the Canonical Series of Lamaštu Incantations and Rituals and Related Texts from the Second and First Millennia B.C.*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 17 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014), though the English translations—where they differ from Farber’s—express my own interpretations.

[5] The status of Lamashtu as a necessary evil for the communal good tends to be downplayed in favor of an alternative etiological myth that became incorporated into the Canonical Lamashtu Series of the first millennium BCE: “It was Anu, her father, (and) Antu, her mother who, in view of her unseemly deeds, forced her to step down [from hea]ven and (also) denied her a place of worship on e[arth]” (I 111–13 in Farber, *Lamaštu*, 154–55). Indeed, as Wiggermann (“Lamaštu,” 225–26) pointed out, “obviously it is not possible to solicit the help of the gods against a demoness that operates on divine assignment; but since in fact the gods do help against her, this legalized version of Lamaštu [i.e., in *Atrahasis*] must represent a minority view, or at least not the one that informs the exorcistic rituals.” The etiology of Lamashtu in the Canonical Series was aligned with the aims of the exorcistic genre and its incantations and rituals, which were concerned primarily for the good of individuals at hand, rather than for some larger good of the human population.

[6] The demoness is not explicitly named here, but has been recognized as Lamashtu by Wiggermann, “Lamaštu,” 225; F. A. M. Wiggermann, “Pāšittu,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 10 (2003–2005): 363.

[7] Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs*, 102–03; and Foster, *Before the Muses*, 253.

[8] Years of reign of the antediluvian kings are summarized by Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 57–58, Table 1; and referred to in *The Ballad of Former Heroes* translated by Foster, *Before the Muses*, 769–70. Along similar lines, the Biblical patriarchs in Genesis 5 and 11 have life spans extending for hundreds of years.

[9] Lamashtu amulets are cataloged following the numbering (with bibliography) in Wiggermann, “Lamaštu,” 219, n. 11; Eva Götting, “Exportschlager Dämon? Zur Verbreitung altorientalischer Lamaštu-Amulette,” in *Exportschlager – kultureller Austausch, wirtschaftliche Beziehungen und transnationale Entwicklungen in der antiken Welt: Humboldts Studentische Konferenz der Altertumswissenschaften 2009*,

ed. Janina Göbel and Tanja Zech (Berlin: Herbert Utz, 2011), 438. I thank Eva Götting for sharing with me her unpublished thesis, “Lamaštu: Ikonographie einer altorientalischen Dämonin” (M.A. thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2009), where detailed information on 87 objects (mostly amulets) pertaining to Lamashtu is provided on pp. 115–73, with appended photos and drawings. A recent count of 97 amulets was affirmed by Miriam Said, “Radiance and the Power of Erasure in an Obsidian Lamaštu Amulet,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 55 (2020): 109, n. 11. The Harvard Semitic Museum was renamed as the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East on April 15, 2020 to be more inclusive and to more accurately reflect the diversity of objects in the collection.

[10] I am indebted and grateful to Adam J. Aja, Curator of Collections at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, as well as the anonymous reviewer of this essay, for details on the amulet’s acquisition described in this paragraph. Albert S. David was brother to the prominent antiquities dealer Elias S. David (1891–1969), who sold antiquities also to the Harvard Semitic Museum, as well as to some of the best-known international collections, including the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A eulogy to “Robert Henry Pfeiffer” appears in the *Harvard Theological Review* 51, no. 2 (1958).

[11] Pseudo-inscriptions are attested for amulet nos. 11, 12, 16, 21, 25, 28, 42, 51, 52, 71, 73, 74, 85, and 86.

[12] In the Yale amulet NBC 8151, for example, “signs are missing at the ends of the first, second, and fourth lines” of a five-line Sumerian incantation, which is recognizable from elsewhere. Ellery Frahm, Agnete Wisti Lassen, and Klaus Wagensonner, “Gods and Demons, Anatolia and Egypt: Obsidian Sourcing of Mesopotamian Amulets and Cylinder Seals Using Portable XRF,” *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 24 (2019): 981.

[13] Instead of the more common writing en<sub>2</sub>-e<sub>2</sub>-nu-ru for “spell,” the Harvard amulet has AN-e<sub>2</sub>-nu-ru, (line 1). Other attestations of this latter writing occur in A. R. George, *Mesopotamian Incantations and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection*, Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 32 (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2016), 25 and Plates I–II (MS 4549/1 i 1); who also pointed to Bendt Alster, “A Sumerian Incantation Against Gall,” *Orientalia, Nova Series* 41, no. 3 (1972): 357 (BM 47859 obv. 1 in fig. 1). One wonders whether a crude, schematic depiction of this rubric may be discerned even in so-called pseudo-inscriptions. Perhaps the abstract forms in amulet YBC 10196 (line 1) could be understood as AN-e<sub>2</sub>-nu-(ru) (Raymond P. Dougherty, “Miscellaneous Antiquities from Southern Babylonia,” *The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 8 (1926–1927): 50, Fig. 1b); and the signs on

amulet Ass. 15156 (line 1) suggestively read as e<sub>2</sub>-nu-x, (Erich Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1919), no. 85). A better understanding of all these inscriptions on amulets awaits the comprehensive study *Lamaštu and Hulbazizi Amulets*, forthcoming by Eva Götting and Strahil Panayotov.

[14] The god Anu (lit. “sky”) was believed to have inseminated the earth and procreated demons of various kinds—the most famous of whom was the Lamashtu demoness, the Daughter of Anu. The drawings described here were likely incised on amulets that were hung at the various doorways and entrances.

[15] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 186–87.

[16] A hand drawing of the Louvre amulet AO 8184 (fig. 4) may be found in François Thureau-Dangin, “Rituel et Amulettes contre Labartu,” *Revue d’assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 18 (1921): 195.

[17] Objects in the Harvard amulet may be compared with similar schematic representations in other amulets: the single-sided comb (nos. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 21, 22, 25, 32, 33, 39, 40, 42, 43, 51, 57, 65, 68, 69, 73, 74, 78, 82, 83, and 85), the giant centipede (nos. 25, 33, 83, and 86), the bent leg of a donkey (nos. 11, 15, 18, 67, 69, 78, and 79), the garment pin or sewing needle (nos. 18, 25, 32, 51, 67, 78, and 83), and the arrow shape representing a spindle (nos. 11, 12, 13, 18, 21, 22, 32, 39, 51, 57, 65, 67, 69, 73, 74, and 78).

[18] For example, Eva Götting, “A Demon’s Travel Kit: An Introduction to the Items Depicted on Amulets against the Demoness Lamaštu,” in *Proceedings of the 11th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Volume 1*, ed. Adelheid Otto, Michael Herles, and Kai Kaniuth (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), 187; who also cites as support a line from the Canonical Lamashtu Series I 49: “You *prick* her with the th[orn of a date palm],” Farber, *Lamaštu*, 150–51.

[19] Many amulets—especially those with more schematic images—portray the comb and the arrow shape (representing a spindle) in proximity to each other, either as complements on opposite sides of Lamashtu’s outstretched arms (see nos. 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 21, 22, 32, 41, 44, 57, 69, 73, and 78), or otherwise (see nos. 11, 39, 51, 65, 74, and 83).

[20] The sign >šū is the logogram (word sign) for “hand,” and the schematic representation of fingers on this hand is what resembles the teeth of a single-sided comb. The sign for the logogram ti (“arrow”; Akkadian: *ūšu*) can also function as the logogram teĝ<sub>4</sub> (“to approach”). “To have one’s hand approach (something)” (šū-teĝ<sub>4</sub>) is “to accept (something).” Possibly, the double arrow shapes on the Louvre amulet (fig.

4) can even be explained as an instance of verbal reduplication, i.e., šu-ti-ti / šu-teĝ<sub>4</sub>-teĝ<sub>4</sub>. Dietz Otto Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar*, Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section One, 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 75, §12.4.2; with more examples in Mamoru Yoshikawa, “The Marû and Ĥamțu Aspects in the Sumerian Verbal System,” *Orientalia, Nova Series* 37, no. 4 (1968): 414.

[21] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 298–99.

[22] Amulets classified as “Type I” by Götting (“Lamaštu: Ikonographie,” 27–39) are those earlier assigned to “Group A” by Wiggermann, “Lamaštu,” 219–22; Farber, *Lamaštu*, 31.

[23] The British Museum amulet (fig. 5) is classified as Type III.2.1 in Götting, “Lamaštu: Ikonographie,” 50–54.

[24] The substitution of woman’s hair with the mane of a male lion was particularly discordant, as the former is a prominent feature of female sexuality in Mesopotamian literature. One incantation made use of this trope to ironic effect: “Her face takes the appearance of a ferocious lion; she arose out of the marshes, with her hair hanging loose, her underwear snipped off” (“RA”: The Incantation Thureau-Dangin, lines 4–5 in Farber, *Lamaštu*, 298–99.

[25] Canonical Lamashtu Series I 127 and 144: “Snake’s venom is her venom, scorpion’s venom is her venom ... [in ‘milk of *dea*] *th*’ her breast is bathed” (Farber, *Lamaštu*, 156–57). The dog was well known as the symbolic animal of Gula, the Mesopotamian goddess of healing. Barbara Böck, *The Healing Goddess Gula: Towards an Understanding of Ancient Babylonian Medicine* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 38–44; Tallay Ornan, “The Goddess Gula and Her Dog,” *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 3 (2004): 13–30. For the pig as a substitute in ritual, see Volkert Haas, *Materia medica et medica hethitica: Ein Beitrag zur Heilkunde im Alten Orient*, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 415–16.

[26] The image of Lamashtu with her bird talons upon a boat could be what is envisioned in the iambic chant by Verrius Flaccus (c. 55 BCE – 20 CE), as recorded by the Roman grammarian Festus: “Go away, Strix, you night-wandering one! Go away from the people, you bird whose name is not to be mentioned! Go away upon swift ships!” Sarah Iles Johnston, “Defining the Dreadful: Remarks on the Greek Child-Killing Demon,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 386–87.

[27] “Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins,

putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.”  
Leviticus 16:21–22 NRSV.

[28] I understand the signs here as *ši*(zi)-*ba-su* (line 13) for *šibassu* = *šibat* (Assyrian form of the Babylonian *šibit*, “capture”) + -*šu* (“his”).

[29] I follow the reading *mê bišrim*, lit. “water of the small child” or “fetal water” (referring to amniotic fluid) by Cécile Michel, “Une incantation paléo-assyrienne contre Lamaštu,” *Orientalia, Nova Series* 66, no. 1 (1997): 63–64; Karl Hecker, “Rituale und Beschwörungen” in *Omina, Orakel, Rituale und Beschwörungen*, ed. Tzvi Abusch, et al. *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments, Neue Folge* 4 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008), 64. For objections to the identification of amniotic fluid on the basis that “elders” (*šībūtum*) are said to drink it, see Farber, *Lamaštu*, 204; George, *Mesopotamian Incantations*, 97, n. 11. But I understand these so-called “elders” (*šībūtum*)—in contrast here to “the tiny ones” (*šahhurūtīm*)—to refer not to “old people,” but to fetuses at a more mature stage of development.

[30] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 148–49. For *nammar* (line 2) in place of the usual word *nimru* for “leopard,” see John Z. Wee, *Mesopotamian Commentaries on the Diagnostic Handbook Sa-gig: Edition and Notes on Medical Lexicography*, Cuneiform Monographs 49/2 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 49–50. Elsewhere, it is said also of Lamashtu that “her lateral parts are spotted like a leopard (*nimru*).” Canonical Lamashtu Series II 37 in Farber, *Lamaštu*, 168–69. In various iterations of the description in first millennium BCE texts, the word *nammarat* (“she is a leopard”) seems to have been substituted by *namurrat* (“she is of terrifying aura”).

[31] Wiggermann, “Lamaštu,” 231; Farber, “Lamaštu,” 444. The variety and non-specificity of pathological effects attributed to Lamashtu argues against identifying her narrowly with any particular disease. Walter Farber, “Lamaštu—Agent of a Specific Disease or a Generic Destroyer of Health?” in *Disease in Babylonia*, ed. Irving L. Finkel and Markham J. Geller (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 137–45.

[32] Also to elude capture by Lamashtu, another incantation wishes that the infant would move with the speed of a tree snake that drops down suddenly through the foliage: “Like snakes of the vineyard, let him fall to its ground” (Kt 90/k, 178, lines 18–19). Cécile Michel, “Deux incantations paléo-assyriennes: une nouvelle incantation pour accompagner la naissance,” in *Assyria and Beyond: Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (The Netherlands: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2004), 398. The depiction of birth as a vertical descent alluded to the position of a birthing woman perched on top of “bricks of birth.” Stol, *Birth in*

*Babylonia and the Bible*, 118–22.

[33] The use of metaphors elsewhere comparing the fetus to a fish or a boat (Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 10) is no real objection to the image of drowning here, since the imagery of Mesopotamian incantations is often piecemeal and not intended to paint a literally cohesive picture.

[34] While the first half of the second millennium BCE saw the establishment of Amorite dynasties in several important Mesopotamian city-states—including that of Hammurabi’s Babylon—the derogatory sense in which the term “Amorite” appears in the incantation seems reflective of attitudes in earlier writings about Amorites as barbaric invaders.

[35] The descriptors *Amurrât* (“Amorite woman”), *Sutû* (“Sutaeen”), and *Elamât* (“Elamite woman”) appear respectively in Farber, *Lamaštu*, 148–49 and 288–89 (*Lamaštu* Incantations OB<sub>1</sub> line 2 and RS line 1); 176–77 (*Lamaštu* Series II 137); and 154–55 and 190–91 (*Lamaštu* Series I 103 and III 84). One wonders whether the “Elamite” appellation arose independently or represents some metathesis with “Amorite” involving the sound /m/ and a liquid consonant /r or l/. The Biblical book of Jeremiah (13:23 NRSV) makes a similar connection between the leopard and tropes about foreigners: “Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Then can you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.”

[36] Götting, “A Demon’s Travel Kit,” 192–93. Reference to the depiction on Lamashtu amulets as a “Reiseszene” (traveling scene) with “Reiseproviand” (travel provisions) was original to Walter Farber, “Tamarisken – Fibeln – Skolopender: Zur philologischen Deutung der ‘Reiseszene’ auf neuassyrischen Lamaštu-Amuletten,” in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed. Francesca Rochberg-Halton (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1987), 85–105.

[37] Although functioning as a criticism of “unwomanliness” in the case of Lamashtu, the blurring of lines between male and female had a legitimate role elsewhere in Mesopotamian culture. For a recent study, see Ilan Peled, *Masculinities and Third Gender: The Origins and Nature of an Institutionalized Gender Otherness in the Ancient Near East* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016). Wiggermann (“Lamaštu,” 238) proposed that homonymy accounted for the pathological effects ascribed to Lamashtu: “As a mythological figure she is the (frustrated) mother (*ummu*), who poisons instead of nurtures, and the (rejected) daughter (*mārtu*) of Anu, who rebels instead of obeys. As a pathogenic agent Lamaštu is fever (*ummu*) and bile (*martu*), the reversed evil variants of what she is not, a good mother and a good daughter.”

[38] The lion-headed Lamashtu is described here, whereas the bird-headed Lamashtu

depicted in Type I.2 amulets (figs. 3a and 4) from the second millennium seems to be acknowledged in another incantation: “Her face is (that of) the Anzû-bird” (“FsB”: An Independent SB Lamaštu Incantation, line 18 in *Farber*, Lamaštu, 296–97).

Anticipating the donkey’s role in Lamashtu amulets of the first millennium BCE, equids appear as prey to the Anzû-bird already in the narrative of Lugalbanda and the Anzû-bird, lines 63–66. Herman Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 138–139. Note also the Early Dynastic III (2600–2350 BCE) copper alloy relief from the Temple of Ninhursag at Tell al-Ubaid, depicting the lion-headed bird with its talons gripping the haunches of two stags (British Museum, BM 114308).

[39] The god Anu is consistently described as the procreator of Lamashtu. Here, the god Ea is called “her father,” perhaps in the sense that he is “her elder” or “her senior” and one of the main gods invoked in incantations and exorcisms.

[40] The word *amēlūta*—often translated “humankind, humanity”—refers in this particular context to the positive qualities of being human (i.e., “humaneness”).

[41] Perhaps referring to some validatory or promissory token used in trade exchange among merchants. For the hem of a garment as a marker of legal identity, see discussion and bibliography in Terri-lynn Wai Ping Hong Tanaka, “Dress and Identity in Old Babylonian Texts” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 66–106.

[42] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 298–99. Farber titled this incantation after the author of its editio princeps (AO 6473, rev. 13–29) in Thureau-Dangin, “Rituel et Amulettes contre Labartu,” 163, 166–67, and 170–71.

[43] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 282–83.

[44] Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 171–92; Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 371–72, 375–81, 465–66, 486, 502–03; Natalie Naomi May, “Female Scholars in Mesopotamia?” in *Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Stephanie Lynn Budin, et al., *Barcino Monographica Orientalia* 10 (Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 2018), 152–58.

[45] Tzvi Abusch, “The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature: The Reworking of Popular Conceptions by Learned Exorcists,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and In Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 54–55, n. 26. Among medical texts are diagnoses that the patient has been “fed dirty things (*lu’ātu*),” “given dirty things to drink,” and touched by “dirty hands,” or that “dirty things have seized him” (Wee, *Mesopotamian Commentaries*, 95–96)—an expression

similar to the description that Lamashtu's "hands (spread) defilement (*lu'tu*)" ("RA": The Incantation Thureau-Dangin, line 3 in Farber, *Lamaštu*, 298–99), with both terms coming from the same lexical root (*lu'û*) meaning "to dirty, defile."

[46] *Utukkū Lemnūtu* ("Evil Spirits") Incantation Series, Tablet 4, lines 150'–53'; and Tablet 5, lines 21–24 in Markham J. Geller, *Healing Magic and Evil Demons* Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen 8 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 162 and 180–81. The midwives mentioned in the Qumran text 4Q560 were understood in a similar light and are assumed to be "related to the fever that attacks newborn children" by Ida Fröhlich, "Demons and Illness in Second Temple Judaism: Theory and Practice," in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period*, ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 88–89.

[47] Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 378. The laws referenced may be read in their context in Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 64 (Laws of Eshnunna, §32) and 120 (Laws of Hammurabi, §194).