APROBADO

Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: A Profile of the Healing Goddess

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Abstract

In his introduction to Ancient Mesopotamia, A. L. Oppenheim expressed his doubts about the feasibility to write a systematic account of Mesopotamian religion (1977, p. 172; cf. 1950). Indeed, if we understand religion as the sum of individual, conceptual and social concepts and take into account the nature and the state of preservation of the sources, it becomes evident that any description must remain incomplete. This is also the case when portraying the figure of the Ancient Mesopotamian healing goddess or goddesses. As a matter of fact, five deities were associated with the domain of healing and merged together into principally one goddess. Though they are all presented in the following discussion, emphasis is laid on the specific character of the healing goddess.

Introduction

We may distinguish between basically two methodological approaches in the field of Ancient Mesopotamian religion—one that can be roughly characterised as historical and another that is essentially phenomenological—a differentiation which can be linked to the nature of the written documentation. It has been suggested that religious literature should not serve as a point of reference since it is often dark and contradictory in contrast to the sober and authentic documentation formed by the administrative and legal documents (Kraus 1951, p. 63). Indeed, the interpretation of religious literature such as hymns, prayers, lamentations or ritual texts is subjective in nature because it can be liable to intuitive apprehension or empathetic attempts to understand the ideas expressed. Yet, these genres of religious literature offer the principal basis to search for structures and phenomena of the divine or to understand the distinct character of deities (see, e.g. Jacobsen 1976). Administrative and legal documentation facilitate a historical approach; in addition, as official documents, they can be taken as authoritative. The information these texts provide concern above all the dissemination of the cult of the gods in its historical dimension; they also permit a close view of the organisation and structure of the cultic personnel. The two methodologies are not mutually exclusive as shown by e.g. phenomenological studies that pay due regard to the historical development of Assyrian and Babylonian monotheism (Lambert 1964; Parpola 2000).

This contribution aims principally at assembling a body of information about the character Ancient Babylonians attributed to their healing goddess(es). The principal sources taken into consideration are therefore religious texts in the broadest sense, including hymns, prayers and incantations. Occasionally, other data will be used such as the information coming from a medical context or from god lists. As shall be seen, the different healing goddesses have many specific features in common, which is ultimately the motivation for their fusion and also the reason to treat them here as one manifestation. Though short discussions referring to the various goddesses are included, no discussion of the historical dimension of their respective cults is offered. Rather, the idea is to provide a small window into the world of some religious

ideas. This view must remain incomplete since there is no way to reconstruct the religious experience of the individual or to grasp the importance of religious activities such as prayers, hymns, incantations and sacrifices to any particular set of beliefs. The lack of information concerning this individual level—a constitutive element of religious systems—is one of the problems that arise in the reconstruction of ancient religions (see Oppenheim 1977, pp. 175–176).

According to the textual evidence, a number of goddesses who had the power of healing, viz. Gula, Ninisina, Nintinuga, Ninkarak and Baba, merged together around the turn of the second millennium BC. These different manifestations well illustrate that the religion of the inhabitants of the ‘fertile crescent’ was essentially polytheistic, despite monotheistic or henotheistic tendencies. Each city, each region had its own pantheon—a result of informally organising religious ideas, practical experience and local preferences—with a major god or goddess at its head (Lambert 1975, 1990, 1997; Sallaberger 2004). Starting at an early stage, explicit pantheons, produced by theologians who created god lists that organised deities in hierarchical order and included divine spouses and divine courts, were superimposed on the implicit ones rooted in popular religious practices.¹ Thus, it does not come as a surprise that each healing goddess possessed intrinsic features of her own, such as a specific filiation and different matrimonial bonds, or a distinctive, geographically limited cult.

Previous treatments offer a broad variety of approaches to the study of the healing goddess. For example, Kraus (1951) in his discussion of the healing goddess Ninisina especially took into account the evidence of administrative and legal documents. Römer (1969) also investigated the persona of the goddess according to literary sources. A number of other studies that offer a comprehensive view of the cultic reality and the various pantheons basing themselves especially on administrative texts and god lists include discussions of the different healing goddesses (e.g. Sallaberger 1993; Richter 2004², or Such-Gutiérrez 2003). Avalos (1995) brings together a variety of textual and archaeological material about the healing goddesses and contrasts the Mesopotamian evidence with that of Ancient Greece and Israel. Fuhr (1977), Groneberg (2000), and Ornan (2004) treat aspects of the healing goddess, especially her animal attribute, viz. the dog, in literature and art. Westenholz (2010) offers a case study of the goddess Ninkarak that discusses the evidence from god lists and literary compositions. Westenholz (2013) provides an analysis of the phenomenon of the merging of the healing goddesses, treating in detail the various forms of this process, as well as a discussion of the role of the healing goddesses in the light of gender studies, taking into account administrative texts, royal inscriptions, god lists and literary compositions along the way. Different is the approach of Böck (2014), who traces features of the healing goddess attested in therapeutic contexts back to literary accounts.

The Character of the Healing Goddess

The healing goddess was considered a deity who vitalizes man and protects life. This is particularly evident from personal names of the Old Sumerian period (ca. 2500–2350 BC) attested in the city of Lagaš (e.g. ‘Baba preserves man’s life’ or ‘Baba has given birth (to the child)’; Selz 1995, p. 99 nos. 227, 230). Also, literary accounts praise Baba’s healing activity, as in, for example, a Sumerian hymn, which was commissioned by one of the kings of the so-called Isin dynasty (ca. 2019–1794 BC). The fourth ruler of the dynasty, Išme-Dagan (ca. 1955–1937 BC), turns to the goddess with a plea to grant him long life. Baba is appealed to as a deity who cares for procreation and protects life (Römer 1965, pp. 236–371. 6, 15, 33). Like Baba, Nintinuga was considered a life-spending deity as her name, ‘Lady who revives the dead’, indicates. Yet, this interpretation appears to be an ancient popular etymology through which theologians tried to give meaning to her name (Krecher 1966, p. 121; Cohen

1976; Selz 2002, p. 661 no. 26). The healing goddess's power of life is well described in a number of Akkadian and Sumero-Akkadian bilingual incantations addressed to Gula, which refer to the deity as the one 'who revives the dead', 'who gives life', and 'who cares for life' (Böck 2014, p. 15).

The domain of life tacitly implies the one of death, which might be the reason for the occasional connection of the healing goddess with the world of the dead. Although a result of ancient scholarly etymology, the name Nintinuga, 'Lady who revives the dead', is illustration enough. We know that Baba, as goddess of the city of Girsu, was associated with the cult of the deceased rulers (Selz 1995, p. 32 no. 14, pp. 37–8 nos. 30–2; Sallaberger 1993, pp. 288–91). But it is especially the goddesses Ninisina, Gula and Nintinuga who seem to have had connections with the netherworld. The fact that one of the goddesses, who belonged to the circle of Ninisina, had the name Ninarali, 'Lady of the Arali' (a poetic term for the world of the dead), points to a certain association of Ninisina with the netherworld (Richter 2004, pp. 189–92, 519). As for Gula, one can point to a ritual feast attested in Ur III times (ca. 2112–2004 BC), which took place in Umma and which sheds light on this less known facet of the goddess. The feast, 'To go out to the early grass', belongs to the cult of the dying god Dumuzi, who was associated with the god Damu. Damu, in turn, was the son of Gula and venerated in her temples (Sallaberger 1993, p. 233–34). According to the elegy 'In the desert in the early grass', which was probably performed during this ceremony, the dead Dumuzi is mourned by his young wife Inana, his sister and his mother (Jacobsen 1975, p. 67; 1987, pp. 56–84). During the celebration in Umma, it was Gula who took over the rôle of the mourning mother, while in Ur, the goddess Nintinuga bemoaned her dead son Damu (Sallaberger 1993, p. 234).

Baba, Nintinuga, Ninisina, Ninkarak and Gula are healing goddesses and divine physicians. Baba appears to have assumed by the end of the third millennium BC the rôle of a healer as shown by the epithets 'physician' and 'physician of the black-headed people' used in literary texts as well as in personal and field names (Ceccarelli 2009, pp. 34–5, 39). Nintinuga's rôle as physician during Ur III times (ca. 2112–2004 BC) is best shown by the fact that actual 'physicians' (*a.zu*) served in her cult (Sallaberger 1993, p. 152). However, it was Gula who overshadowed the other goddesses and became the principal healing deity. This process begins gradually some time before the end of the third millennium BC and finds its culmination in the syncretistic hymn of a certain Bullussa-rabi to the healing goddess Gula. This hymn, which roughly dates between 1400 and 700 BC, mentions among other names Nintinuga, Ninkarak, Ninisina and Baba (Lambert 1967).

The healing goddesses did not only cover the entire domain of healing but also had specific functions. Ninisina was supposed to clean wounds from blood and suppuration and to dress the afflicted part with plasters and her cooling bandages. This responsibility for wounds is also said of Nintinuga and Ninkarak (Böck 2014, pp. 16–8, 22–3). In addition, Nintinuga was associated with the care for the musculoskeletal system and in particular with the attacks of the grievous *Azag* demon. In Akkadian, this is rendered *asakkum mar um*—an expression which appears in the ~~forementioned~~ curse section as the area of responsibility of Ninkarak (Böck 2014, pp. 22–4, 26–8). Another disease demon that is fought off by the healing goddess is Namtar. It is Ninisina who expels this evil creature from man's body (Böck 2014, pp. 34–8). In the iconography of cylinder seals, the healing goddess appears occasionally with a scalpel in her hand (Orman 2004). As a matter of fact, the instrument became so characteristic for her healing powers that only by lifting it against afflictions of the eye and the musculoskeletal system would the pains leave the body of the patient (Böck 2014, pp. 18–22).

The healing goddess was believed to guard over the whole process of procreation from the moment of conception until delivery. A detailed account can be found in the so-called Sumerian *Ninisina A* hymn. Here, one of the tasks of the goddess concerns ensuring the

fecundity of women, another one seems to include holding the newborn baby upside down to make it cry aloud and still another one consisted in depositing the afterbirth (Römer 2001, p. 113; Böck 2014, pp. 30–2). To ensure fecundity and healthy delivery was also the responsibility of the goddess Baba, according to a Sumerian composition, a so-called *Balbale* hymn, which was commissioned by Kubātum, the wife of the penultimate king of the Ur III dynasty, Šu-Suen (ca. 2036–2028 BC). The queen apparently had the birth of her child commemorated with this hymn (Widell 2011). The idea of watching over the process of coming to life was so strongly anchored in the belief system that Gula and Ninkarak were invoked in incantations that were to be recited during rituals of fecundity and pregnancy (Böck 2014, pp. 31–32). This close association is possibly the reason why the healing goddess appears in some incantations that are directed against the female demon Lamaštu. As is well known, Lamaštu threatens the life of both mother and newborn baby (Farber 2014, pp. 1–6). The healing goddess Gula tries here to fight Lamaštu back with her dog(s) (Farber 2007; Wiggermann 2010; Böck 2014, pp. 40–4). Also, the goddess Ninkarak is attested in the context of Lamaštu (Westenholz 2010, p. 388; Böck 2014, p. 43). The link between Gula and newborn life was so strong that it entered the first millennium BC medical literature, where Gula is especially associated with infants' diseases (Böck 2014, pp. 62–9). The healing goddess's rôle of protecting newborn babies focuses on the element of life and vitality in contrast to death—life, that is, in the sense of the capacity to grow, life as a force. In this regard, her function differs and can be distinguished from that of a mother and birth goddess, who shapes and creates the foetus in the womb, a process which descriptive names of the mother goddess such as 'Lady shaping', 'Lady creator', 'Lady potter', and 'Lady carpenter' well illustrate (Jacobsen 1976, pp. 107–108; Krebernik 1997, pp. 505–507).

Most particular is the association of a dog with the healing goddess (Groneberg 2000, pp. 297–304; Böck 2014, pp. 38–44). Some scholars suggest that the healing effect of dog saliva led to the close link between animal and deity (Fuhr 1977, pp. 139–45; Heimpel 1972–1975, p. 496). Others interpret the licking as magical means to transfer disease from man to dog (Haas 2003, pp. 525–29). The association is manifestly reflected in the archaeological evidence. So far, two temples from the Kassite period have been attributed to the healing goddess Gula, one excavated in Isin and another one in Nippur (Hausperger *et al.* 1981; Gibson 1990, pp. 1, 4–5). In both temples, numerous statues of dogs came to light (Groneberg 2007, p. 97). To the temple complex of Isin belonged a dog cemetery, which supports the idea that dogs were used to promote certain magico-medical healing processes (Charpin 2011, p. 410).

Dog burials and the association of healing deities with this animal is not limited to Mesopotamia and can also be found in the Levant and Greece (Day 1984; Wapnish & Hesse 1993). However, unlike in Greece where the association of Asklepius with the dog is explained by the fact that a shepherd dog guarded and raised him as an infant (Avalos 1995, p. 61), there is no Ancient Mesopotamian mythological explanation for Gula and her dog.

Dramatis Personae

BABA

In the Old Sumerian period, Baba was considered the goddess of Girsu, located in the city-state of Lagaš; her spouse was Ningirsu. However, Baba (also transcribed Bawu, Bawa or BaU) seemed to have been originally linked to the cult of Uruk; like Inana, she was the daughter of An.² The reading and meaning of her name, which might belong to a pre-Sumerian substratum, is not clear (Marchesi 2002). Baba seems to have fused with Gula towards the end of the third millennium BC as implied by the above-mentioned *Balbale* hymn. Though Baba is invoked, it is Gula who receives lavish gifts for the healthy delivery of Kubātum's child

(Weierhäuser 2008, pp. 157–58). She also merged with Ninisina as suggested by the hymn the Isin king Išme-Dagan dedicated to her. Here, the king addresses Baba but states that he enters the Isin ~~Egalma~~ temple of Ninisina, who is not mentioned by name (Römer 1965, p. 238 l. 59). There are different explanations as to what motivated this merging. Ceccarelli (2009) interprets this peculiarity as theologically and politically prompted: through the fusion of Baba and Ninisina, Ninisina's spouse Pabilsag is equated with Ningirsu/Ninurta. In this way, Pabilsag turns into the son of the supreme god Enlil, that is, Ningirsu/Ninurta, and both Isin, home of Pabilsag, and its ruling dynasty gain in legitimacy. Westenholz (2013, p. 77) argues that one of the factors for this fusion might lie in the general decline of the territory of the city-state of Lagaš by the beginning of the second millennium and the rise of Isin, which consequently led to the negligence of Baba's veneration. In view of the *Balbale Hymn to Baba* of Šu-Suen's wife, it is also possible to see in Išme-Dagan's *Hymn to Baba* another attempt of the Isin rulers to establish themselves as natural successors of the Ur III kings.³

NINTINUGA

The main place of Nintinuga's worship was the city of Nippur as shown by the administrative records from the end of the third and beginning of the second millennium BC (Sallaberger 1993, pp. 100, 110, 140, 149; Richter 2004, pp. 110–12). Her name appears in god lists and votive inscriptions as early as the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2500–2350 BC) (Krebernik 1986, p. 187; Steible 1982, pp. 228–30). Nintinuga's spouse is Ninurta. Her healing activity is described in the Sumerian votive inscription *A Dog for Nintinuga* and the Sumerian letter prayer written to her by Inanakam, both of which are only known from Old Babylonian school exercise tablets (Kleinerman 2011, 171–77; Böck 1996, pp. 5–11; Römer 2004, pp. 237–49). Westenholz (2013, p. 83) suggests that her cult diminished in the context of the gradual abandonment or impoverishment of Southern cities. By the beginning of the second millennium BC, the healing goddess from Nippur is called Ninisina (Römer 1969, pp. 279–84).

NINISINA

Ninisina, as her name indicates (literally 'Lady of Isin'), was the tutelary goddess of the city. Her spouse was Pabilsag. In his study of Isin and Nippur in the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2003–1595 BC) Kraus (1951, pp. 59–75) included a systematic survey of the local pantheon of Isin. Documents from Ur III times (ca. 2112–2004 BC) show that the local differences in the cult of the healing goddesses were blurred and that they were only nominally distinguished; the same gods, for example, were venerated in the temples of Ninisina in Isin and of Nintinuga in Nippur (Sallaberger 1993, pp. 153–54). However, it is said that Nintinuga would travel to Isin to visit the healing goddess Ninisina there (Such-Gutiérrez 2003, pp. 291–92). Some records about sacrifices on the occasion of a journey of the healing goddess from Umma to Nippur offer a glimpse at the cultic reality. The healing goddess of Umma is called Gula and as such she is referred to in records issued in Umma; however, according to the documentation from Puzriš-Dagan, she is called 'Ninisina from Umma' (Sallaberger 1993, pp. 153–54).

NINKARAK

In her 2010 analysis of the deity, Westenholz brings to the fore the importance of Ninkarak. The meaning of her name is still debated (Westenholz 2010, p. 381). Despite the Sumerian etymology, the goddess is not attested in Sumerian literary texts. References to Ninkarak in god lists and administrative documents are found from the Early Dynastic period

(ca. 2500–2350 BC) onwards. Her cult can be traced in Northern and Southern Mesopotamia as well as in the Middle Euphrates area; of special significance was her cult at Sippar (Westenholz 2010, pp. 383–95). Kraus (1951, p. 70) suggested that Isin was the original home of Ninkarak and that her cult merged there with the cults of Ninisina and Gula. Illustrative examples for the fusion between the goddesses Gula and Ninkarak and between Ninisina and Ninkarak is the exchangeability of the theophoric element in proper names: a man called Puzur-Ninkarak, for example, was also known as Puzur-Gula (Kraus 1951, pp. 49–50, 65; Richter 2004, p. 192) and the toponym ‘field of Ninkarak’ was equally referred to as ‘field of Ninisina’ (Westenholz 2010, p. 385). Westenholz (2010, p. 385) draws attention to another factor that may have motivated the merging of cults: following the migration of population from Isin, local Isin traditions were brought into Sippar.

GULA

There is disagreement whether the goddess Gula, written with the signs gu_2-la_2 , was originally the same deity as the healing goddess Gula, spelled $gu-la$, or whether both deities merged with each other at a later date.⁴ Gula’s main site of veneration during the Ur III dynasty (ca. 2112–2004 BC) was the city of Umma (Sallaberger 1993, pp. 88–9). Administrative records from Old Babylonian times refer to cultic sites in Nippur, Isin, Larsa and Ur (Richter 2004, pp. 525–26). According to Kraus (1951, pp. 68–9), her original name was no longer understood and explained as ‘ $gu-la$ ’ ‘the Great’.⁵

Notes

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¹ See Lincoln (2012, pp. 17–29) for the terminology of implicit and explicit pantheons.

² Selz (1995, p. 102 nos. 267–68, p. 100 no. 249, p. 102 no. 268) and Bauer (1998, p. 512).

³ For this aspect, see especially Tinney (1996), pp. 4–5; Charpin (2004), pp. 60–4.

⁴ Westenholz 2013, pp. 82–3 note 340; Such-Gutiérrez 2003, pp. 246–47; Richter 2004, p. 112.

⁵ This translation, ‘the great’, is not beyond doubt: one would expect for the epitheton ‘the great’ the Sumerian adjective gal and not $gu-la$. Krecher (1993, p. 90) and Black (2000, p. 13) stress that Sumerian $gu-la$ should be derived from a fientive verb * gul . Black (2000, pp. 13–4) offers the translation ‘large’. The term $gu-la$ appears occasionally after the names of gods or temples and is often followed by the same name to which a different characterisation is attached. This would point to another meaning such as ‘greater’ or ‘greatest’, ‘former, retired’, ‘main’ or ‘capital’; see Such-Gutiérrez (2003, p. 225); Steinkeller (1981, p. 83 note 29; 2011, p. 376 note 15).

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of the business cycle, starting with the
on perfect competition, constant returns
production. In this environment goods
extra profits and the structure of market
he number of firms in the individual firm
etermined by the model. The New-Key
otaki (1987), has introduced product
general equilibrium models with nominal
ed and supply shocks. Most of this literat

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