Borders
Terminologies, Ideologies, 
and Performances

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Transgressions of the Ancient Mesopotamian religious, moral and social code are subject to divine punishment and are followed by all types of misfortune. Both the Sumerian and Akkadian languages have provided a rich vocabulary to describe the concept of the invisible line or zone that separates good from evil, the sacred from the profane, and the appropriate from the improper, as well as terms for the physical marking of the border between these areas in rituals. Often the word “taboo” is employed to refer to something which is set apart from the ordinary and as such consecrated or prohibited. As a term borrowed from another cultural worldview and religious outlook, “taboo” does not properly fit the Ancient Mesopotamian evidence and has been used here only initially in the meaning of “something inapproachable or unattainable” and therefore “untouchable.”

The following discussion addresses the issues of the native terminology and its underlying cognitive concept, the forms of transgression and their contextual frame, the physical impact of divine punishment on the human body, and those rituals that set an example for the function of borders.

1. The terminology and its cognitive concept

The main Akkadian word to designate something abominable is ikkibu(m). The term is thought to be a loanword from eg₇,gebₓ which is the pronunciation of the Sumerian word níg,gig in the Emesal dialect. However, a direct loan from the Sumerian language is equally possible. It may not come as a surprise that

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the semantic fields of Akkadian \textit{ikkibu(m)} and Sumerian \textit{níg.gig} are overlapping. However, attestations coming from differing contexts show that both terms have additional nuances beyond the shared meaning. Sumerian \textit{níg.gig} is a compound noun constructed with \textit{níg}, “thing, what,” and the adjective \textit{gig} which has the basic meanings “sacred” and “sick.”

It has been suggested that they are “separate independent antonyms”; another interpretation followed here understands Sumerian \textit{gig} as “something driving away or warding off,” “something that is repulsive, against nature,” connecting thus the two seemingly different meanings.

Two references provide an insight on how \textit{níg.gig} was imagined. One comes from one of the versions of the short Sumerian narrative \textit{Enlil and Namzitara}, which is about the encounter between the supreme god Enlil disguised as a raven and Namzitara, a priest at Enlil’s temple in Nippur. In the Sumero-Akkadian bilingual version from the city of Emar, the much discussed phrase appears: “Twice sixty years are the years of humankind – it is its \textit{níg.gig}.” Translators have rendered the term variously as “bane,” “misfortune,” “term,” or “limit.” Taking into account calculations of Ancient Babylonian life expectancy, 120 years seems a rather unreachable age, suggesting the meaning “limit” in the physical sense with the nuance of something impossible to attain or something that would be against nature. The other reference comes from the description of a ritual that is embedded in an exorcistic Sumerian spell against evil demons. One of the single rites to be performed to ward off the demon consisted in drawing a circle of flour around the bed of the possessed patient. The flour is called “\textit{níg.gig} for

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the Spirit-of-the-dead.” As will be discussed below, the visual delimitation is used to mark off the area of the patient and to create a zone of protection. This area was considered powerful since neither demons nor gods could cross the line. The flour was believed to have the capacity to stop and turn away the attacking demon; as “repelling limit” the flour circle was so strong that it was deemed unbreakable.

As the two references indicate, the original concept of níg.gig is that of a border which cannot be approached because it is repelling and which creates by delimitation an inaccessible and powerful area or zone. This basic meaning is diluted and transformed according to context. Suffice it to mention some examples of changes in meaning and further nuances of the term, as well as differences between Sumerian níg.gig and Akkadian ikkibu(m). From the connotation “sick” as something repulsive, a meaning “trouble” or “hardship” evolved which is usually rendered in the Akkadian language with a different term, viz. maruštú(m). Both words are attested in enumeration of all types of misfortunes, including illness and attacking demons, that can befall humankind. A number of attestations for the term níg.gig in Sumerian texts come from the collection of proverbs. Bereft of context many of these aphorisms are difficult to interpret. Occasionally the meaning of níg.gig is best rendered as “it is shocking” or “appalling,” still resonating with the effect of rejection: “to own property and to insist on more – this is shocking” or “putting an unwashed hand in one’s mouth is appalling.” A few times the transformed sense is derived from the notion that something is against nature or not conforming to the expected ordinary course of events: “a young scribe neglects (his instructions) – this is preposterous” or “a wild ox is not fit for the plough.”

Incidentally, human action also affects the gods: for example, “to take revenge repels the god Ninurta” or “a witness comes forward in a case he knows nothing of.”

22 Alster, Proverbs of Ancient Sumer, 194 proverb 11.66.
ing about (but says) ‘I shall tell you all I know about the case’ – this repels the god Suen.”  

This same meaning is shared by the Akkadian term **ikkibu(m)**. An entire ritual had to be performed to be freed from the consequences of having stepped over this “limit that repels the gods” (see below 2. Transgressions). The text provides a long list of examples of human actions and behaviour that turn away the gods, such as “not to free the captive and not to release a man in bonds” or “to cause a judge to pronounce an incorrect judgment.” Also some foods were believed to repel the gods. Many food taboos were restricted to only one day of the year, namely the 7th day of the month **Tašritu** (corresponding to the months of September / October); others, like the prohibition against eating especially leeks, which could alter the state of purity, applied only to priests. It is, however, often difficult to determine the rationale behind some food prohibitions. A more comprehensible example for precisely the 7th **Tašritu** comes from the so-called **Offering Bread Hemerology**, also known as **Hemerology of Assur**: “(a person) should eat [neither] fish or leek, or a scorpion will sting him: it repels (because it is preserved for) the god Šulpāʾe, lord of the orchard.”

According to an older tradition Šulpāʾe belongs to a group of gods who are called “the fish-eaters”; he also was believed to guarantee the growth of garden vegetables, which might explain why eating fish or leek could be repulsive to him. The idea of repulsion is especially evident in secular contexts. In the curse section of a boundary stone establishing the borders of property the one who dares to alter the contract inscribed on the stone or misplaces or destroys the stone is threat-
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ened: “he shall become an outcast (ikkibu(m)) in his city.”\(^{32}\) Especially in Akkadian texts another nuance of the term can be detected. Here ikkibu(m) refers exclusively to the area which is protected (by the repelling limit); the meaning is transferred to something which is reserved (place or action) to a king or god. In this way certain cuneiform tablets containing specialized knowledge which is to be kept away from the uninitiated become the ikkibu(m), the “exclusive property” of gods.\(^{33}\)

The act of breaking the border and entering the protected area is described in Sumerian and Akkadian with the idiom “to eat (gu₇, akālu(m)) a nīg.gig or ikkibu(m),” i.e., “to commit an infringement.”\(^{34}\) Often instead the corresponding and synonymous phrase azag gu₇ or asakka(m) akālu(m), literally “to eat what is set apart (for king or god),” i.e. “to commit a violation,” appears. The Sumerian term azag refers originally to the treasure of the god.\(^{35}\) The treasure was possibly kept in the so-called “house of the azag/asakku(m),”, a place that is inaccessible.\(^{36}\) This aspect of seclusion possibly explains the shift in meaning from “treasure house” to a “place which is set apart.” In a number of references the term asakku(m), referring to the material property of gods, is synonymously replaced by the Akkadian words for “oath” (nīšu(m)) and the word for “sweepings,”\(^{37}\) and the verb “to eat” in the phrase asakka(m) akālu(m) by “to swear” (tamū(m)).\(^{38}\) These alternative formulations have been thought to throw light on the original concept.\(^{39}\) However, it should be noted that it is not clear how representative this evidence is for the general development of the concept in

32 S. Paulus, *Die babylonischen Kudurrus-Inschriften von der kassitischen bis zur frühneubabylonischen Zeit* (AOAT 51; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 839 text U l. 36.
37 The word is written with the logogram sar.meš which usually stands for Akkadian warqū “herbs.” For the idea that “herbs” were consumed see D. Charpin, “Manger un Serment,” in: *Jurer et maudire: pratiques politiques et usages juridiques du serment dans le Proche-Orient Ancien* (Médiiterranées 10–11; S. Lafont ed.; Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 91–92. J.-M. Durand proposed that the term might be rather a Mari writing for the Akkadian word sākurātum “sweepings”; see *La religion amorrite en Syrie à l’épisode des archieves de Mari* (OLA 162/I; Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 581. This meaning was accepted by D. Charpin, “Les formulaires des contrats de Mari à l’époque amorrite: entre tradition babylonienne et innovation,” in: *Trois millenaires de formulaires juridiques* (S. Démaire-Lafont and A. Lemaire eds.; Genève: Librairie DROZ S. A., 2010), 38.
Ancient Mesopotamia. It has been suggested that the *asakku(m)* was protected by an oath which was taken during a ceremony in which drink and food were consumed. It seems as if guarding an *ikkibu(m)* could not be conceived of without an oath. Accordingly, an infringement is tantamount to breaking an oath. It has been put forward that drinking water in which “sweepings” are dissolved formed part of the ceremony of taking an oath. Indeed, often such ceremonies include the ingestion of food and drink or anointment with oil. Interestingly, in curse formulas concerning perjury it is occasionally said “just as bread and wine enter into the intestines, so may the gods make this oath enter into your intestines and into those of your sons and daughters” or “just as oil enters your flesh, so may they cause this oath to enter into your flesh, the flesh of your brothers, your sons and your daughters.”

If the oath is broken the great gods of heaven and earth would “turn water and oil into an *ikkibu(m)*,” “something repelling” for the perjurers. That this menace is not to be taken as a metaphor is shown by a group of diagnostic texts as well as magico-medical prescriptions about the physical impact of a broken oath on the digestive tract (see below 3. The impact of breaching on the human body).

It is possible that the close connection between *ikkibu(m)* and oath led to the development of the independent coexistent concept called in Akkadian *māmītu(m)*. The term describes oaths that “derive their authority from the threat of sanctions, whether divine or terrestrial”; according to context the meaning shifts to curse and ban. In the latter sense of “ban” it occurs in a ritual text that is to be recited in order to ward off demons. The main rite of the ritual consists in drawing a line of flour to protect the patient. Transgressing

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42 Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, 56 paragraph 94 l. 560; quoted by Charpin, “‘Manger un Serment,’” 94.
45 See below 3. The impact of breaching on the human body.
46 See van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 50–52.
49 Schramm, *Bann, Bann!*, 8–9.
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this magical border is sanctioned with a māṃitu(m) curse (see below 4. Drawing borders in rituals). It is noteworthy that in Akkadian religious texts the acts that are considered violations of the “marked-off space” and the reasons for incurring conditional self-cursing are not only occasionally identical but were conceived as equally grave transgressions.50

2. Transgressions

The range of violations is very broad since both secular and sacred spaces were marked off. To diminish the booty of a soldier was considered an ikkibu(m) infringement against both the gods and the king.51 Intercepting and diverting sacrifices such as sheep, ghee and flour for regular offerings were equally considered an azag transgression and punishable by death.52 The best source for violations is the ritual book Šurpu “Cremation,” which dates in its best-preserved version to the 7th century BC.53 The aim and function of the book conditions the interpretation of the transgressions. The Šurpu ritual consisted in the recitation of incantations, which the exorcist recited for his patient while the patient was performing a number of symbolic rites. The patient is said to be “sick, troubled, distraught and in danger of death”54 because of having committed crimes and broken oaths, acts that are considered sin and subject to divine punishment in the form of sickness. The exorcist’s task is to plead with the gods for removing and annulling the patient’s sins, thus healing the patient. The idea is that of a lawsuit in which the patient is the culprit and stands before his or her gods; it is indispensable that he or she admit his/her guilt even if he/she is not conscious of having committed any infraction. As symbols for the sin various objects are symbolically burned;55 before that the patient’s mouth is purified and his hands are washed.56 In order to figure out the transgression in question the exorcist recites long lists of examples in the hope that one of them would apply to his patient.

50 See below 2. Transgressions.
51 Charpin, “‘Manger un Serment,’” 88.
53 Reiner, Šurpu, 7–10.
54 Reiner, Šurpu II: 4.
55 Note in this context that sacrileges such as stealing the temple treasure were punished with death by fire; see F. Joannés, “Une chronique judicaire d’époque hellénistique et le châtiment des sacrileges à Babylone,” in: Assyriologica et Semitica. Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner (AOAT 252; J. Marzahn and H. Neumann eds.; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 206–211.
56 See also below 3. The impact of breaching on the human body.
The first of these lists, which forms the second chapter or tablet of the book, includes up to 120 entries, which range from offending the gods and wrong social behaviour towards family, friends, neighbours, the community, and business partners to mistreating the weak, issuing false statements, and improper handling of ritual objects. Suffice it to mention a few examples to give an idea of the style and content: “he forgot to mention the name of his god in his incense offering”,57 “he despised father and mother, he offended his elder sister”,58 “he estranged friend from friend”,59 “he had intercourse with the wife of his neighbour”,60 “because he stood up in the assembly speaking inadequate words”,61 “he gave with small measure but received with big measure”,62 “he did not clothe a young man when he was naked”;63 “altogether he talks false words”;64 “he is held responsible for the kindled kinūnu(m) brazier.”65 It has been stressed that the statements are in the first place explanations for the origin and cause of the troubling sickness of the patient.66 However, secondarily they establish a religious, moral and social code. Violating this code was considered variously as “sins, errors, crimes, offences or (being under) curses” (Akkadian arnu(m), ḫīṭātu(m), gillātu(m), ennītu(m), and māmātu(m)).67 The term nig-gig or ikkibu(m) is attested three times in the first list, once referring to offence against the gods by one “who has eaten what is preserved to his god, who has eaten what is preserved to his goddess,” once in the meaning of general transgression “because of the evil infringement he has committed,” and once in context of the city or city community: “he ate what was preserved for his city.”68 No information about the precise nature of the crime is given. It is noteworthy that less grave infringements appear beside serious crimes, which makes it impossible to estimate or rank the severity of each transgression.

The breaking of an oath is the topic of the following incantation, which forms the third tablet or chapter of the book. More than 170 entries deal with the māmītu(m) oath, which makes the Šurpu book our richest source for oaths too.

57 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 79.
58 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 36.
59 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 27.
60 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 48.
61 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 81.
62 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 37.
63 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 51.
64 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 57.
68 Reiner, Šurpu, II: 5, 69, 95.
However, the interpretation of the entries is hampered by a series of difficulties. One is related to the ambiguous meaning of mahitu(m) which, as has been stated above, refers to both an oath and its curse as sanction resulting from breaking the oath. Others refer to the style of the incantation, listing entries that lack not only any context but also seem not to differentiate between an oath and breaking the oath. Several entries refer to objects that were used in the ceremony of taking an oath, such as the so-called āsharu(m) cup from which water is drunk to be mindful of an oath. The entry reads: “mahitu(m): to drink water from the āsharu(m) cup.”

Another entry alludes perhaps to the symbolic act when purchasing a field that has as one of its borders a water-course: “mahitu(m): breaking a clod and throwing the clod into water.” It is probable that this type of entry refers to the mishandling of objects that form part of ceremonies for taking an oath; the misuse of objects or the imitation of essential gestures would then be sanctioned. However, it is equally plausible to understand the mahitu(m) oath as an independent force which is activated by breaking the oath; each sanction would then derive its name from the elements used, the gods involved in the oath taking, or the locations chosen for the ceremony. The idea would be that of a mahitu(m) which takes up residence in animate and inanimate beings once an oath is taken and which becomes alive in case of violation. As a matter of fact, the verbs which are constructed with mahitu(m) are verbs of action used in context with living beings: when a person falls sick it can be because mahitu(m) has “caught, seized, reached or struck a man,” employing the same phraseology when gods and demons attack a man to punish him.

Other entries are seemingly easier to understand, such as “mahitu(m): swearing faithfulness to a friend and then killing him.” The mahitu(m) curse could be transmitted between family members up to seven generations down and was deemed so contagious that by only touching a person under curse one could get infected.

The Šurpu book is not the only cuneiform collection which associates ikkibu(m) transgressions with mahitu(m) curse. The other, also a collection of incantations and prayers, is called Lipšur ("may it absolve you") litanies. The affinities between these litanies and the Šurpu book have long been recognised.

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72 As stressed by Bottéro, “Une grande liturgie exorcistique,” 210.
73 Reiner, Šurpu, III: 34.
Here examples for transgressions, classified as “sin” (Akkadian arnu(m)), are immediately followed by māmītu(m) curses. If the exorcist was unable to figure out what wrong behaviour caused the patient’s sickness he could still resort to another set of incantations which were called Ištul idi “My god I do not know.” These incantations were often recited together with performance of the Šurpu ritual in case the patient was completely unaware of his transgressions. The Lipšur litanies could form part of a long ritual which is known under the Sumerian title nam.ērim₂.bur₂.ru.da. The term nam.ērim₂ is translated in Sumero-Akkadian bilingual texts with Akkadian māmītu(m); the ritual served to “to relieve (a person) from the curse (which resulted from breaking the māmītu(m) oath).” The Sumerian term nam.ērim₂ refers in the older Sumerian judicial documents to an assertoric oath. The person who takes such an oath declares that he or she has issued a true statement. The action is described with the phrase nam.ērim₂ kus₂, literally “to cut off from somebody something evil.” It has been suggested that this expression might have referred originally to a statement with which the one who takes the oath disassociates himself from something evil or false. In the later religious literature this meaning shifted then to “curse.”

3. The impact of breaching on the human body

A medical cuneiform book offers some, though little, information about the impact of an īkkibu(m) transgression on the body. In the treatise on diagnostic and prognostic omens entitled Sakikkû “Symptoms,” a person who is diagnosed with “having eaten an infringement” shows as symptoms pains in the belly, which is expressed by the phrase “(the patient) shouts ‘my belly, my belly.’” By contrast, an asakkû(m) violation was indicated by the throat constricting the windpipe and provoking choking. Both attestations point to the idea of how the infringement was activated in the body. It obstructed the throat and caused pains and troubles in the belly. Also the māmītu(m) curse was felt in the body. A number of entries in the Sakikkû book describe the following symptoms: “(the patient) suffers at-

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77 Edzard, “Zum sumerischen Eid,” 77.
78 R. Labat, Traité akkadien de diagnostics et pronostics médicaux (Leiden: Brill, 1951), 124 l. 22. The phrase goes on with another diagnosis which was considered equally severe, viz. “(the patient) has touched / laid hands on a man or a woman.”
79 Labat, Traité akkadien, 84 l. 28.
80 For the discussion of symptoms see also van der Toorn, Sin and Sanction, 80–81.
tacks of sickness and anxiety during the night”; \(^{81}\) “(the patient) salivates while talking, his face is covered with the \(\text{Ab\text{"h}az}\) jaundice demon, and he suffers from diarrhoea”; \(^{82}\) “(the patient) keeps on talking maliciously(?);” \(^{83}\) “(the patient) suffers from vertigo, his intestines are inflated, his eye rims are inflamed, the tips of his feet are inflamed, he bleeds from his left nostril” \(^{84}\) “(the patient) is now hot, now cold, his flesh is covered with yellow spots, […]”; \(^{85}\) “(the patient) collapses before having eaten, craving for garlic or cress annoys him, the tips of his fingers and toes are made bright”; \(^{86}\) “(the patient) is hot, he becomes nauseous, chokes, and what he expels is black”; \(^{87}\) “(the patient) runs a high fever and it does not fall, he belches and coughs and his belly rises and falls for vomiting”; \(^{88}\) “(the patient’s) chest and back are aching constantly, what he expels from his belly is black, he is nauseous”; \(^{89}\) “(the patient’s) belly is hot, he eats bread and drinks beer but regurgitates it, his epigastric region and his shoulders are causing him constant pain, he coughs, belches and spits”; \(^{90}\) “(the patient’s) epigastric region is causing him piercing pain, his belly holds fever and the fever is constant, he spits out repeatedly black sputum and vomits again and again”; \(^{91}\) “(the patient) vomits repeatedly.” \(^{92}\)

The majority of the symptoms points to severe digestive problems. Further symptoms are dizziness, heat in the belly, belching and spitting out black stuff and an inflammation of the dorsal of the feet. In a plea directed to the sun god Šamaš the exorcist recites for his patient an incantation against a \(\text{māmītu(m)}\) curse which does not release its victim. The text offers a literary account of the effects of a broken oath on the body, including anxiety, weight loss, insomnia

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\(^{81}\) N. P. Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik* (AOAT 43; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 203 l. 80.


\(^{84}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 253 l. 19–20; note the expression “hand of the curse.”

\(^{85}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 253 l. 21; note the expression “hand of the curse.”

\(^{86}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 253 l. 22–23; note the expression “hand of the curse.”

\(^{87}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 253 l. 25.


\(^{89}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 254 l. 28; note the variant “sin”.

\(^{90}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 254 l. 29–30; note that the symptoms refer to both “sin” and “curse.”

\(^{91}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 254 l. 31–32.

\(^{92}\) Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 272 l. 2; note the expression “hand of the curse.”
and digestive troubles.\textsuperscript{93} The wording is different from the description of symptoms in the medical book \textit{Sakikkû} but probably refers to the same condition. It appears that there was a certain similarity between the physical effects of having committed an \textit{ikkibu(m)} transgression, “eaten” an \textit{asakku(m)} violation, and broken an oath. The various symptoms of severe digestive troubles can be understood as a detailed medical account of what the curse formula “just as bread and wine enter into the intestines, so may the gods make this oath enter into your intestines” physically meant.

Ancient Babylonians developed various strategies for coping best with the consequences of a broken oath. One consisted in the performance of the \textit{Šurpu} ritual, in which, as mentioned above, alongside the recitation of incantations the exorcist and his patient carried out basically two actions. One was cleansing the mouth of the patient: one by one tamarisk, soap plant, reed, alkali, salt, cedar, and juniper are addressed in incantations to “cleanse and purify the mouth of man.”\textsuperscript{94} Supposedly the exorcist used these items to wipe clean the mouth of his patient while reciting the incantations. The other main rite was concerned with the symbolic burning of the sin: the patient peeled an onion and threw it into fire, stripped off dates, unravelled a matting, plucked apart flocks of wool, goat’s hair, red wool, and corns of grain, all to be thrown successively into the fire as well. It is noteworthy that so much emphasis is laid on the mouth cleansing, which is possibly to be explained by the fact that the mouth emits evil and blasphemous talk. The symptom of malicious talk in the \textit{Sakikkû} book, mentioned above, fits well this context. The concept of a transgression that emerges from the mouth is explicitly stated in a short text about the manufacturing of an amulet stone chain which was meant inter alia “to extirpate a malicious \textit{ikkibu(m)} transgression, as many as come out from the mouth.”\textsuperscript{95}

Another form of getting rid of the effects of a \textit{māmītu(m)} curse is described in the so-called ritual “to relieve (a person) from the curse (which resulted from breaking the \textit{māmītu(m)} oath)” (\textit{nam.ērim₂.bur₂.ru.da}). Here the exorcist manufactured two wax effigies, one for the patient and the other representing the \textit{māmītu(m)} curse. Then both figurines were married – a common rite to transfer disease and disaster in Ancient Mesopotamia\textsuperscript{96}, supplied with provisions for their journey to the world of the dead, and then buried in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} Reiner, \textit{Šurpu}, IX: 7, 15, 24, 32, 40, 47, 56.
\textsuperscript{96} See M. Stol, \textit{Epilepsy in Babylonia} (CM 2; Groningen: Styx, 1993), 99–102.
According to some accompanying rites of the ritual *Iššulidi* “My god I do not know,” the figurines could also be burned.\(^98\) However, for restoring the patient’s health completely it was indispensable to reconcile the gods with prayers and sacrifices.\(^99\)

Other strategies include wearing amulet chains or directly treating the physical symptoms. Instructions for the manufacturing of at least five amulets with three, ten, eleven, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-two stones are preserved.\(^100\) A small group of medical prescriptions refers to the treatment of some of the symptoms mentioned in the *Sakikkû* book. Suffice it to mention three examples which confirm and complement the range of problems that are diagnosed with *māmītu(m)*. One recipe commences “If *māmītu(m)* has seized a patient and he has very high fever and sweats a lot” and recommends a potion to stop the fever.\(^101\) Another recipe locates the pain in the feet describing possibly a gangrene “if a patient suffers from a gangrene (on the foot) and the surface of his flesh is covered with white and black spots – this is the disease of *māmītu(m)*”\(^102\) which is treated by applying a cataplasm. A third prescription states that “anything (the patient) ingests does not stay calmly in his belly but revolts so that he discharges everything through his anus and does not eat bread.”\(^103\) Various recommendations follow, prescribing a bath, an enema, a salve, and a potion. If the symptoms had advanced already too far the patient would die, such as in the case “if the gangrene (of the foot) has spread too much, *māmītu(m)* has seized (the patient) – he will calm down but die a little later.”\(^104\)

### 4. Drawing borders in rituals

A *māmītu(m)* curse once unleashed was a dangerous threat to life and could be used as an instrument. To the exorcist this powerful force served to ban demons. A small magical compendium, entitled in Sumerian *sag.ba sag.ba*, includes two long incantations that were meant to repel evil demons and protect the patient

\(^{98}\) See Ebeling, *Tod und Leben*, 118 rev. 5.


\(^{100}\) Schuster-Brandis, *Steine als Schutz- und Heilmittel*, 98–99 chains no. 44–49. The *māmītu* curse was occasionally associated with witchcraft and other evil machinations. Three amulets with five, seven, and eight stones respectively were believed to protect from them; see *idem*, 100–101 chains no. 50–51.


\(^{102}\) R. Campbell Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), no. 15,3 + 18,5 + 32,2 + 73,1 + 74,1 + 75,1 ii: 33.


\(^{104}\) Campbell Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Texts*, no. 15,3 + 18,5 + 32,2 + 73,1 + 74,1 + 75,1 ii: 61’.
from their attacks. What makes these two incantations so important for the concept of transgressions and borders is the context in which they had to be recited as well as their contents. The Sumerian term sag.ba is usually rendered with “ban.” The ban is imposed on the demons and serves as a threat to destroy them in case they approach a sick person. This menace closely resembles the mechanisms of an oath turned into a curse. As a matter of fact, the two Sumerian terms sag.ba and nam.erim₂ are rendered in Akkadian with māmītu(m), which stresses the tight connection between the two concepts.¹⁰⁵ In the incantations the ‘sag.ba ban’ takes on material form. It is called “drawing of the gods which cannot be transgressed, drawing of heaven and earth which cannot be altered so that not even a god can overthrow it, and neither god nor man can remove it.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the incantations were recited over lines drawn usually with a mixture of flour and presumably water.¹⁰⁷ The flour is associated with the goddess of grains, Nisaba. The lines represent the ban or the border that the demons cannot overstep as explicitly stated in the second incantation “Ban! Wherever (the demon) comes from, it cannot pass over the drawing [...] the drawing – you (demon) shall not approach it!”¹⁰⁸ The terms for drawing in Sumerian and Akkadian are giš.ḫur and uṣurtu(m) respectively. The word is also used to designate divine designs, plans and ordinances for heaven, earth and man¹⁰⁹ emphasizing the concept of something irrevocable and unalterable. “Drawing a line” is expressed in Akkadian with a paronomastic construction, so typical for Semitic languages, viz. uṣurta(m) ešēru(m), literally “to draw a drawing.” The drawings referred to with uṣurtu(m) have the shape of linear and curved scratched or carved lines.¹¹⁰ In the context of the sag.ba sag.ba incantations the line is heaped up.

The border or line has other qualities beyond the apotropaic one of repelling demons. It can also attack and catch the evil force, as is stated in the first of the two sag.ba sag.ba incantations. The ban, i.e. the drawing, was considered “an inevitable trap set for the evil force” and “a stretched net from which nobody can escape.”¹¹¹ As soon as a demon would approach the flour line, the net of Nisaba,

¹⁰⁵ For the discussion of the meaning of sag.ba and the similarities with nam.erim₂ see Schramm, Bann, Bann!, 3–8.
¹⁰⁷ See Schramm, Bann, Bann!, 9–10.
¹⁰⁸ Schramm, Bann, Bann!, 74–75 l. 9, 13b; see also van der Toorn, Sin and Sanction, 51–52.
¹¹⁰ See Paulus, Die babylonischen Kudurru-Inschriften von der kassitischen bis zur frühnebabylonischen Zeit, 39–40 and 62 note 117. Also the lines in the hands and the wrinkles on the face were called uṣurātu(m) see B. Böck, Die babylonisch-assyrische Morphoskopie (Archiv für Orientforschung Beiheft 27; Wien: F. Berger & Söhne GmbH, 2000), 156 l. 106 and 284 l. 16.
¹¹¹ Schramm, Bann, Bann!, 20–21 l. 11–12.
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the goddess of grain and as such the owner of the flour, would tie it up.\textsuperscript{112} The sag.ba sag.ba incantations formed part of other complex rituals which provide important information about the moment when the line had to be drawn. They had to be recited in three ritual ceremonies that were performed to cure a patient from evil demons such as the Spirit-of-the-dead,\textsuperscript{113} from the baby-snatching female demon Lamaštu,\textsuperscript{114} and from witchcraft and other evil machinations.\textsuperscript{115} In each healing ceremony the exorcist did not simply draw a line but drew a circle of flour around the patient’s bed. In this way the patient was set apart in a space which was beyond the reach of the demons. The border helped create a zone which was so powerful that not even gods could enter it, as quoted above. In each of the three ceremonies the preceding rites consisted in the expulsion of the demons or evil power and the purification of the patient. To give an idea of the moment when the encircling takes place, the first mentioned ritual, the so-called ‘Embrocation’ (\textit{Muššuʾu}) ceremony, is further described. The rite of surrounding the patient’s bed with flour belongs to the concluding rites, which are preceded by actions specific to the \textit{Muššuʾu} ritual. These consist, as the name implies, in rubbing various parts of the body with a salve while reciting incantations; both actions are meant to exorcise the demons which had taken hold of the patient’s body. These rites also include tying various amulet stone chains around the limbs and the torso while reciting \textit{Muššuʾu} specific incantations. The amulets function very much like a boundary in that they are also believed to repel demons and protect the exorcised patient. The incantations and the rites performed at the end of the healing ceremony constitute standard procedures.\textsuperscript{116} They include first tying a shoot or frond of a date palm, followed by wool strings, around the patient’s hands and feet in order to ward off evil forces – forming again a boundary. Then the bed was surrounded with red wool, which provided the first layer of protection through encircling. Incense was burnt and all the sides of the bed were fumigated. Subsequently, the patient was sprinkled with water, and water was poured around his bed, which is the second encircling. Following that, the

\textsuperscript{112} Schramm, \textit{Bann, Bann!}, 20–21 l. 27–29.


\textsuperscript{115} For the reference to the incantation in the performance of the so-called \textit{Maqlû} ceremony against witchcraft see Tz. Abusch and D. Schwemer, \textit{Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals} (AMD 8/1; Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2011), 397–398.

\textsuperscript{116} Note that these rites conclude one section during the \textit{Maqlû} ceremony and are not performed at the end as pointed out by Schramm, \textit{Bann, Bann!}, 9.
exorcists drew the third and last circle, this time of flour paste, around the bed. Once the patient was secured, an additional area was created by drawing still another flour circle. This one marked off the house and gate of the patient. The force of this circle is best illustrated by the fact that the exorcist is said not to touch the door. After the recitation of another incantation the exorcist was able to enter the house again and to perform a last rite in which he lifted a weapon whose wood had magical – apotropaic – properties.117

Encircling the patient’s bed with the flour paste (as well as tying amulets or wool around the his body parts) served to safeguard the purified patient and to impede a new attack of the demons. Drawing circles or encircling as a form of protection is a well-known feature of magical rites in general.118 Interestingly, the border was round. In Ancient Mesopotamia the roundness must have had special significance because demons would choose as their whereabouts places that are characterised by the exact opposite of round, viz. corners and angles. They seemed to have preferred such places because they could find refuge and hide in the often-dark corners. Also they preferred to enter and leave houses through corners and niches.119 The fact that the roundness did not provide a hideout for demons stresses, thus, even more the apotropaic character of the circle. The use of flour to enclose and protect a place is attested in still another ritual. The expression used is simply “to surround with flour,” in Akkadian qēma(m) lamû(m). This one concerns one of the rites to be performed in case a person decides to build a new well, to rebuild an old well, or to repair a well or a bath tub in his house. After excavation work the site had to be purified, and immediately afterwards the place was surrounded with flour.120 Again the circle of flour served to protect a purified site from renewed contamination. A similar function is behind the Akkadian paronomastic expression šidda(m) šadādu(m) “to draw a line.” This indication is often attested in rituals after a sacrifice to the gods has been prepared; the action served to separate the area of the sacrifice from the rest of the scene and to protect it. As material for drawing the lines flour could be used or strings were stretched to mark off the different ritual settings.121

In another ritual directed against the demons Spirit-of-the-dead, Alû and Gallû, a figurine representing the demon was trapped in a flour circle, i.e. a

121 For a discussion of the expression which has been formerly understood as “drawing a curtain” see S. M. Maul, Zukunftsbewältigung. Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi) (BAFO 18; Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 55–56.
line was drawn around the figurine. The expression used in Akkadian is *zisurrâ lamû(m)* “to surround with a flour circle.” Here the circle had indeed the function of catching the demon and immobilising it; it could not escape and caught in the circle it became subject to further rites aiming at destroying its evil power.\(^\text{122}\)

5. Conclusion

Borders in rituals have two important functions that are derived from the idea of separating and protecting areas. According to context the line can take on an apotropaic function. This is the case when a person or a specific ritual setting or area had to be protected from contamination or evil influences. The other function, which stresses the aspect of enclosure, is trapping and locking up malignant forces by surrounding them with a circular line. For both concepts it is essential that the boundary could not be transgressed, thus impeding anybody from entering or leaving the space. The area set apart was apparently not of neutral quality but was rather charged with positive energy since it helped to absorb and eliminate evil power and to maintain the purified state which was the condition for gaining divine approval.