

THE EVIL EYE OF HUMANS, ANIMALS, AND DEMONS IN SUMERIAN LITERATURE

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The widespread ancient belief in the deleterious powers of the eye as reflected in Sumerian literature has been largely neglected in recent research. It has even been suggested that the belief system, though common in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, was foreign to the ancient Sumerians. While Thomsen suggested that the evil eye was limited to humans, other scholars have argued that the evil eye was only associated with divinities in Sumerian literature. This study focuses on the conceptual content of linguistic expressions relating to the eye of humans, animals, and demons in order to demonstrate that much can still be learned about this complex belief system as it existed in ancient Mesopotamia when conceptual metaphors and metonymies for the evil eye are also taken into account.

Keywords: Evil eye, Sumerian literature, cognitive linguistics.

The belief that a person, animal, or supernatural being can cause harm by a mere look is widely attested in many parts of the world. The belief, commonly known as the evil eye, and its history and associated practices have been extensively studied through the centuries.¹ Unfortunately, its nature and function in ancient Mesopotamian societies, where it is commonly thought to have originated, have received little attention during the past few decades. In an influential study, Thomsen² suggested that early Assyriologists' estimation that

¹ Cf. ELWORTHY, F. T. *The evil eye: An account of this ancient and widespread superstition*; SELIGMANN, S. *Der böse Blick und Verwandtes: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiten und Völker*; ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*.

² THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1.

the evil eye belief was widespread in ancient Mesopotamia was erroneous. In her view, references to the evil eye were limited to a few Sumerian incantations against the evil eye. When one considers the vast amount of known incantations against witchcraft, mostly written in Akkadian, it would seem, according to Thomsen, that the evil eye was limited to the older period of Mesopotamian history. Curiously, she also suggests that the evil eye was believed to be relatively harmless. By contrast, Geller³ maintains that the evil eye belief complex was unknown to the ancient Sumerians and that references to the evil eye (igi hul) in Sumerian incantations refer to hallucinations, since it is associated with dragons, or *Mischwesen*, and devastation on a large scale.

Apart from these two influential, and contradictory, studies, few scholars have commented on the evil eye belief in ancient Mesopotamian literature. Veldhuis⁴ suggested that Thomsen overlooked a few references to the evil eye in Mesopotamian literature and further questioned her conclusion that the belief system was not prevalent. Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi⁵ also subsequently published several additional texts that explicitly mention the evil eye. Relying heavily on claims of earlier Assyriologists and Ford's⁶ comparative study of the evil eye belief complex (EEBC) in Mesopotamian cultures in various historical periods, Elliott⁷ also questioned Thomsen's view that the belief system was limited in spread and influence. When the investigation is broadened to include other genres of Sumerian literature, the evil eye indeed seems to be ubiquitous.

³ GELLER, M. J. Paranoia, the evil eye, and the face of evil. In SALLABERGER, W., VOLK, K., ZGOLL, A. (eds.). *Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien: Festschrift für Claus Wilke*, pp. 120–121.

⁴ VELDHUIS, N. C. Comments on igi-hul. In *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires*, 1992, Vol. 43, pp. 33–34.

⁵ CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1993, Vol. 83, No. 1, pp. 170–205; CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). Deuxième partie. In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1995, Vol. 85, No. 1, pp. 19–46; CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). Troisième partie. In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1995, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 169–200.

⁶ FORD, J. N. 'Ninety-nine by the evil eye and one from natural causes'. In *Ugarit Forschungen*, 1998, Vol. 30, pp. 201–278.

⁷ 3 ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.*

In addition, it is not limited to human agents and witchcraft, as suggested by Thomsen.⁸

However, much more information about the evil eye belief system can be gleaned through a careful study of references to the evil eye in Sumerian literature. Reviewing literature on the topic of the evil eye, Lykiardopoulos⁹ concluded that most studies provide a fragmented view of the topic. In order to overcome this limitation, she developed a structural frame of reference to facilitate more complete and organised studies on the subject of the evil eye. Firstly, she suggests that studies should focus on the possessor of the evil eye. Possessors are the people, animals, or supernatural beings believed to be capable of causing harm through their glance. Further, although almost everyone and everything is susceptible to the evil eye, certain people and objects seem to be more vulnerable, such as babies, beautiful women, and prominent members of society. Thirdly, in Lykiardopolous' view, comprehensive studies should comment on folk theories of how the evil eye works. Other aspects that deserve systematic investigation are the ways in which people protect themselves against the evil eye and attempt to cure the effects of the evil eye. In order to investigate these aspects of the evil eye belief and practice, this study will focus on conceptual metaphors and metonymies relating to the evil eye in Sumerian literature with specific reference to humans and animals as possessors of the malefic gaze.

A cognitive linguistic approach

In order to study various facets of the evil eye belief complex in Sumerian literature it seems necessary to extend the investigation beyond specific references to *igi hul* by including metaphorical descriptions of the evil eye. Metaphors are commonly understood to be the understanding of one entity or process in terms of another.¹⁰ Over centuries of scholarship, and especially during the past four decades, it has become clear that the human ability to think and communicate about one thing in terms of another, has contributed greatly to our cognitive abilities and ways of communication. George Lakoff and Mark

⁸ KOTZÉ, Z. The evil eye of Sumerian deities. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2017, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 102–115.

⁹ LYKIARDOPOULOS, A. The evil eye: Towards an exhaustive study. In *Folklore*, 1981, Vol. 92, No. 2, pp. 221–230.

¹⁰ DEMYÉN, Z., SEMINO, E. Introduction: metaphor and language. In DEMYÉN, Z., SEMINO, E. (eds.). *The Routledge handbook of metaphor and language*, p. 1.

Johnson's¹¹ celebrated *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) introduced what has become known as conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), which presents metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon central to thought. In this theory, much of our thinking depends on conventional conceptual metaphors. These conventional conceptual metaphors involve systematic sets of correspondences between concrete 'source' domains, such as JOURNEY and abstract 'target' domains, such as LIFE. Metaphors in language, such as 'I'm at a crossroads in my life,' are linguistic vehicles for the conceptual metaphors we think by, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY.

Since the introduction of conceptual metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, much research has been done to confirm, modify, and add to their original ideas. For example, many scholars have confirmed their notion that metaphors are pervasive in everyday thought and language.¹² In addition, research has also drawn attention to the correspondences, or mappings, between two conceptual domains in the metaphorical process. For example, linguistic expressions, such as "that kindled my ire," and "she was burning with anger," point to correspondences, such as the cause of fire corresponds to the cause of anger and the thing on fire corresponds to the angry person. Research has also confirmed that source domains are typically concrete domains, while target domains are usually abstract, such as in the ANGER IS FIRE metaphor. This makes intuitive sense, since emotional states, for example, often remain largely hidden and difficult to describe because of their complexity. More tangible and accessible source concepts therefore enable the understanding and description of these abstract target concepts.

According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor is not limited to language, but also occurs in thought. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between linguistic expressions used metaphorically and conceptual metaphors as cognitive patterns that we use to think about aspects of the world in our daily lives. Conceptual metaphors, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, potentially influence the way that we think about life. For example, we can make plans for the journey of life, prepare for obstacles that may be encountered, prefer certain paths to others, and so on. When we think in such ways, we use the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor to formulate our ideas.

Conceptual metaphor theory also suggests that not all conceptual metaphors are based on similarities between source and target domains. For example, the conceptual metaphor INTENSITY IS HEAT is based on the sensorimotor

¹¹ LAKOFF, G., JOHNSON, M. *Metaphors we live by*.

¹² KÖVECSES, Z. Conceptual metaphor theory. In DEMYÉN, Z., SEMINO, E. (eds.). *The Routledge handbook of metaphor and language*, p. 14.

experience that high intensity activities lead to increased body temperature. Since bodily experience is similar across languages and cultures, many conceptual metaphors seem to be universal, especially as they relate to the conceptualisation of the emotions. However, cultural conceptions regarding the universal experience of bodily sensations are equally important in the development of conceptual metaphors.¹³ Contextual factors have also been found to lead to the creation of novel, context-induced conceptual metaphors. Thus, metaphors can be based on universal body experience, cultural specific concepts, and the more general context to produce universal primary metaphors and non-universal context-induced metaphors. In the ensuing part of the paper various linguistic vehicles for the concept of the evil eye in Sumerian literature will be considered as they relate to human, animal, and demonic possessors.

Conceptual metaphors for the evil eye of humans, animals, and demons in Sumerian literature

The evil eye belief complex is based on the cultural interpretation of the eye as an active organ.¹⁴ Until around 1500 CE it was commonly believed that the eye projected energy or light. This understanding of sight, common in the ancient world and the Middle Ages, is known as the extramission theory of vision. Unlike the contemporary, scientific view of the eye as a recipient of light and sensation, people in the ancient world described the eyes of supernatural beings, humans, and animals as “fiery,” or “flashing,” emitting energy similar to the rays of the sun, a fire, or a lamp. This widespread folk theory of vision is central to the interpretation of conceptual metaphors and metonymies for the evil eye in Sumerian literature. It explains why the Sumerians conceived of the eye as an active organ that could do harm. In one of the earliest references to the evil eye, dating to the pre-Sargonic period, the Sumerian sage warns against doing harm with the eye:

igi-zu-ta hul na-ak

[Do not do evil with your eye.]¹⁵

¹³ YU, N. *The contemporary theory of metaphor: a perspective from Chinese*.

¹⁴ Cf. ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*, p. 24.

¹⁵ BLACK, J. A. et al. The instructions of Shuruppak. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.5.6.1, line 175 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from

One of the most prominent aspects of the evil eye is its close association with envy.¹⁶ While all persons and objects are vulnerable to the evil eye, beautiful and successful people and prized possessions are more likely to be attacked by the evil eye. For example, the combination *igi lá* “to tie the eye (to)” often occurs with the modifier *tùm* “to bring” to express the concept of desire or envy. In one Sumerian proverb, such envy is described as more deleterious than a verbal curse:

áš dug₄-dug₄-ge bar ši-in-dar
igi-tùm-lá saġ-ġiš im-ra-ra

[Who speaks curses injures only the skin;
Greedy eyes, however, can kill]¹⁷

In view of this concept that the EVIL EYE KILLS, it is not surprising that such greedy eyes were forbidden, especially in temples:

igi-tùm-lá gíd-i-da niġ-gig-^dnin-urta-ke₄

[Greedy eyes and reaching out for things are abominations to Ninurta]¹⁸

é^den-lil-lá kur-ġé-ġál-la-kam
šu-gíd igi-tùm-lá šu-sumur niġ-gig-ga

[The temple of Enlil is a mountain of abundance;
To grasp, greedy eyes, and to take are abominations in it]¹⁹

While the evil eye is most commonly believed to project particles of energy that damage or destroy the object struck, the ancient Mesopotamians also

<<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>; Cf. CUNNINGHAM, G. *Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations, 2500–1500 BC*, p. 59.

¹⁶ DUNDES, A. Wet and dry, the evil eye. An essay in Indo-European and Semitic worldview. In DUNDES, A. (ed.). *The evil eye: a casebook*, p. 263.

¹⁷ BLACK, J. A. et al. The instructions of Shuruppak. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.5.6.1, lines 134–135 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

¹⁸ BLACK, J. A. et al. Proverbs: Collection 3. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.6.1.03, line 307 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

¹⁹ BLACK, J. A. et al. Enlil in the E-kur (Enlil A). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.4.05.1, lines 54–55 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

clearly believed that it could harm the possessor her/himself. For example, in *The Return of Lugalbanda*, the evil eye (igi ḥul) elicited by ripening crops seems to affect the covetous observers:

*buru₁₄ sig₇-ga an-na ba-e-a-èd-dè
a-šag₄-ga igi ba-ab-ḥul ní su-e bí-ib-ús*

[The harvest grew yellow beneath the sky.
They looked at the fields with an evil eye. Unease overcame their
bodies]²⁰

Similarly, when the greedy eye (igi tùm lá) is again said to kill in a Sumerian proverb, it seems to imply lethal consequences for the possessor, rather than an enemy as an object of a curse or the evil eye as in the example above:

*tur gu₇-a lú nu-til-le
igi-tùm-lá saĝ-ĝiš ra-ra*

[To eat modestly does not kill,
But greedy eyes do]²¹

It may be for this reason that admonitions not to covet abound in Sumerian literature. In one proverb, the verbs *tur* “to be small” and *gíd* “to be long” combine with *igi* “eye” to refer to the envious, evil eye:

ùkur bu-lu-ùḥ si-il-’le’ lú níĝ-tuku-e igi-tur nam-ba-e-gíd-i

[The belching poor man should not look enviously at the rich man]²²

The same expression is used in a Sumerian letter to describe the action of former friends and acquaintances. The context is that of misfortune and hostility, suggesting that the expression may well refer to the casting of the evil eye in the metonymy SQUINTING IS THE EVIL EYE:

²⁰ BLACK, J. A. et al. Lugalbanda and the Anzud bird. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], t.1.8.2.2, lines 260–261 [cit. 11 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

²¹ BLACK, J. A. et al. Proverbs: collection 3. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.6.1.03, lines 30–31 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

²² BLACK, J. A. et al. Proverbs: collection 2 + 6. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.6.1.02, lines 31 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

*gu₅-li dūb-sa zu-a kal-la-ĝu₁₀
lù dili gu₇-ù-gin₇ igi-tur mu-un-ĝid-i-eš*

[My friends, companions, acquaintances, and esteemed colleagues look enviously at me as at a man who eats alone]²³

In another proverb, the combination *igi il* “to lift the eye” is used as a linguistic vehicle for the envious, evil eye. The combination is more commonly used to refer to the deleterious evil eye of deities:²⁴

níg-gur₁₁ lugal-la-ke₄ igi-zu na-an-il-en

[Do not covet the property of the king]²⁵

Because the evil eye, as it relates to envy, can harm both the object of vision and the possessor it is sometimes unclear whether a person is consumed by the envy of others or that of her/himself. For example, in the *Letter from Lugal-nesaĝe to a king radiant as the sun*, the author complains that he is consumed by the envious, evil eye (*igi lá*). It is not clear whether it refers to his own, or to the evil eye of others:

igi-lá é lugal-ĝá-ke₄ ib-sig₉-ge inim-ĝar gig ma-lá

[The envious evil eye overwhelms me in my king’s house. A bad reputation besets me]²⁶

The same expression is also used to refer to consuming envy in a letter of Inanaka to Nintinuga. In this instance the consuming covetousness seems to apply to the complainant herself:

²³ BLACK, J. A. et al. Letter from Lugal-nesaĝe to a king radiant as the moon. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], t.3.3.02, lines 16–17 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

²⁴ KOTZÉ, Z. The evil eye of Sumerian deities. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2017, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 111–112.

²⁵ ALSTER, B. *Proverbs of ancient Sumer: the world's earliest proverb collections*, p. 277.

²⁶ BLACK, J. A. et al. Letter from Lugal-nesaĝe to a king radiant as the sun. Version A. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], t.3.3.03, line 15 [cit. 10 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

*nin-ġu₁₀ é ma-an-dù-ma igi lá-bi ba-tuš-e-en
zu-a kal-la-ġu₁₀ ġiri kúr mu-da-an-dab₅-bé-eš*

[My lady, a house has been built for me, but I sit here longingly.
My acquaintances and dear ones abandoned me]²⁷

Similarly, the expression *igi tùm lá*, already mentioned above, refers to an envious evil eye that consumes the possessor, in this case a monkey, in the so-called “monkey’s letter”:

*eridugki iri-ġé-ġál-den-ki-kà-ka
ġe₂₆-e e eġir ġišig-é-nar-gal-la-ke₄ al-tuš-en
igi-tùm-lá mu-ġu₇-en
nam-ba-da-ug₇-en
ninda ba-ra-gibil-lá kaš ba-ra-gibil-lá*

[In Eridu, the abundant city of Enki,
I am locked up in the musician’s house.
The evil eye consumes me.
Don’t let me die
Because of a lack of fresh bread and beer]²⁸

In a Sumerian proverb, the expression *igi lá* is again used as a linguistic vehicle for the concept of the envious evil eye:

*eridug^{ki} ġé-ġál-la dù-a-ba
^{uġu}uġu₄-bi é-nar-ra-ka igi-lá-bi al-tuš*

[In Eridu, built in abundance,
The monkey sits with longing eyes in the musician’s house]²⁹

Similar to the “monkey’s letter,” the proverb may hint at the envy that abundance elicits from people or animals that have limited access to sources of

²⁷ KLEINERMAN, A. *Education in early second millennium BC Babylonia: The Sumerian epistolary miscellany*, pp. 171-172.

²⁸ POWELL, M. A., Ukubi to mother ... The situation is desperate: A plaidoyer for methodological rigor in editing and interpreting Sumerian texts with an excursus on the verb *taka*: *da_x-da_x* (TAG₄). In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1978, Vol. 68, No. 2, p. 194.

²⁹ BLACK, J. A. et al. Proverbs: collection 3. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], t.6.1.03, lines 276–277 [cit. 11 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

food. Other desirable qualities can also elicit the evil eye. In *The advice of a supervisor to a younger scribe*, it is suggested that flaunting knowledge could provoke the evil eye, expressed here with the combination *igi suḥ*, “to tear out (with) the eye” as a vehicle for the concept THE EVIL EYE CONSUMES:

níg-zu-a-ni pa nu-um-è ka-ga₁₄-ni ba-an-lá
tukum-bi níg-zu-a-ni pa ba-an-è igi mu-un-suḥ-suḥ-ù-ne

[He did not flaunt his knowledge. His words were modest.
If he flaunted his knowledge, people would cast the evil eye on him]³⁰

The expression is also used to refer to the evil eye of Inanna in praise poetry.³¹ In the same text, however, it also describes the destructive power of the evil eye of humans, where it may be interpreted as a vehicle for the metonymy GLARING IS THE EVIL EYE:

lú-ù lú-ra igi mu-un-suḥ-re inbir igi bí-in-du₈-ru

[One man glares at another, they battle with the eye]³²

Sometimes the eye is described as an instrument of destruction. For example, in *A praise poem of Šulgi*, the glance is compared to a split reed, which points to the concept THE EYE IS A DANGEROUS WEAPON:

KI³ x GI² URU x gi-ḫal-ḫal-la-gin₇ igi-ni mu-na-an-ġál

[... he looked at him as with split reeds]³³

The evil eye was also sometimes associated with anger in the ancient Near East. For example, Mouton³⁴ demonstrates that the “evil eye” is used as a

³⁰ BLACK, J. A. et al. Advice of a supervisor to a younger scribe (E-dub-ba-a C). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.5.1.3, lines 16–17 [cit. 11 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

³¹ KOTZÉ, Z. The evil eye of Sumerian deities. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2017, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 102–115.

³² BLACK, J. A. et al. A hymn to Inana (Inana C). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], t.4.07.3, line 50 [cit. 11 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

³³ BLACK, J. A. et al. A praise poem of Šulgi (Šulgi O). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.2.4.2.15, line 37 [cit. 11 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

synonym for the “furious eye” of the storm god of Kuliwišna in Hittite rituals. Similarly, in the third ‘house’ of the bilingual *bīt rimki* series, the evil eye is mentioned in parallel with anger:

lú igi-ḥul-ġál-e igi-ḥuš ba-an-ši-ib-il-la

[The man at whom the evil eye looked with an angry eye]³⁵

In view of this parallel use of an angry gaze with the evil eye, references to the “red eye,” *igi ḥuš*, usually translated with “anger,” may well be interpreted as an “evil eye,” especially when mentioned in the context of envy and competition. For example, in the quarrel between the fish and the bird about who was the greatest, the combination *igi ḥuš il* “to lift a red eye” may well be interpreted as a linguistic vehicle for the concept ANGER IS THE EVIL EYE:

ud-bi-a ku₆-e mušen-ra ka ba-ab-du₈ igi-ḥuš um-mi-in-ši-il

[Then fish shouted at bird, eyeing it angrily]³⁶

Another linguistic vehicle for the evil eye is the combination *igi dū* “to set one’s sights on” when it combines with the modifying verb *tur* “to be small,” probably hinting at a squinting action and the metonymic concept SQUINTING IS THE EVIL EYE:

*’ŠEŠ’ X X MU X nam-úš-kúr-ra igi-tur-ġu₁₀ ba-an-dū A MI BI ak-ġu₁₀ in
nam-ma-ġá-ġá*

[My ... brother ... foreign plague looked at me maliciously and insulted me for my doing]³⁷

³⁴ MOUTON, A. Le «mauvais œil» d’après les textes cunéiformes hittites et mésopotamiens. In AMIR-MOEZZI, M. A., DUBOIS, J.-D., JULLIEN, C. (eds.). *Pensée grecque et sagesse d’Orient: Hommage à Michel Tardieu*, pp. 431–432.

³⁵ BORGER, R. Das dritte “Haus” der Serie *bīt rimki* (VR 50–51, Schollmeyer HGŠ NR. 1). In *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 1967, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 5.

³⁶ BLACK, J. A. et al. The debate between Bird and Fish. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.5.3.5, line 138 [cit. 13 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

³⁷ BLACK, J. A. et al. Letter from Kug-Nanna to the god Ninšubur. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.3.3.39, Segment B line 3 [cit. 13 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

In other instances, the combination *igi tur* “to narrow the eye” on its own seems to convey the concept of the evil eye as squinting:

šeš- ġu₁₀ lú-kúr nu-me-a igi-tur mu-^ṽun^ṽ-[...]

[My brother, although he is not my enemy, ... regarded me with an evil eye]³⁸

Another idiomatic expression that conveys the concept of casting the evil gaze is the combination *igi-érim du₈* “to cast an enemy eye”:

a-a-ugu-ġu₁₀ èn-tukum-šè níġ-kas₇-ġu₁₀ igi-érim mu-e-du₈

[Father who begot me, how long will the evil eye be cast on my account?]³⁹

Although the evil eye is referred to in Sumerian literature from the pre-Sargonic period onwards, spells specifically directed against it are known only from the Old Babylonian period and later. TCL 16, 89, dating from this period, describes the deleterious effects of the evil eye in detail:

*igi muš-ħuš igi lú-ulu₃ muš-ħuš
igi lú níġ-ħul dim-ma muš-ħuš
an-né ba-te im nu-šġġ-šġġ
ki-a ba-te ú-šim nu-mú-mú
gud-e ba-te ġi^{is}šudul₅-bi im-du₈
é-tùr-e ba-te ga-ra-bi im-ta-kum-kum
ka-sur-ra ba-an-dib-dib
guruš-ra mu-na-te ib-lá mu-da-an-kum
ki-sikil-ra mu-na-te túġ mu-da-an-šub
um-me-da dumu-da mu-na-te lirim-bi mu-e-du₈
šar-šar-e ba-te ħi-is zà-ħi-li im-ħul
pú ġi^{is}kiri₆ ba-te gurun im-ħul
igi kur-ra kur-ta nam-ta-an-è
šego-bar-re si-muš-bi nam-ta-an-è
igi ħul igi gig-ga ħé-kud*

³⁸ BLACK, J. A. et al. Letter from Lugal-nesaġe to a king radiant as the sun. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.3.3.03, line 22 [cit. 13 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

³⁹ BLACK, J. A. et al. The lament for Sumer and Urim. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c.2.2.3, line 451 [cit. 15 August 2020]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

^{kuš}*a-ĝá-lá-gin₇ hé-dar*
^{dug}*sil₃ bur-zi bahar₂-ka tilla₂-a hé-gaz-gaz*
gub-bu-da-ba gub-bu-da-ba
KA e-sír-ra-ka gub-bu-da-ba
šul diĝir nu-tuku gaba im-ma-an-ri
igi lil-àm hé-sìg-e
^d*asar-e abzu-a*
nam-mu-un-da-búr-e

[The eye is a fearsome snake, the eye of the man is a fearsome snake,
The eye of the evil man is a fearsome snake.
It approached heaven – it did not rain,
It approached the earth – herbs did not grow,
It approached the ox – it broke its yoke,
It approached the cattle pen – its cheese became bad,
It catches the Kasura-fish,
It approached the young man – he lost his strength,
It approached the young woman – she lost her garment,
It approached the nurse with child – her hold became loose,
It approached the vegetables – lettuce and cress became bad,
It approached the garden – the fruit became bad.
The eye of the mountain came out from the mountain,
The wild ram let its shining horns come out.
May the evil eye, she sick eye be cut off,
May it split open like a leather bag,
May it break into pieces like the potter's *pursītu*-pot on the marketplace.
When it approaches, when it approaches,
When it approaches at the entrance of the street,
It encounters the man without a personal god.
Let the eye turn into wind,
(Even) Asar in Abzu
Cannot undo (this spell)]⁴⁰

In another Old Babylonian incantation against the evil eye, known from various copies from the ancient cities of Meturan and Sippar, the harmful effects of the evil eye are described in general terms:

⁴⁰ THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 31–32; EBELING, E. Beschwörungen gegen den Feind und den bösen Blick aus dem Zweistromlande. In *Archiv Orientální*, 1949, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 206–207; VELDHUIS, N. C. Comments on *igi-hul*. In *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires*, 1992, Vol. 43, p. 34.

igi níĝ-ḫul dim-ma pa-ḫal-la-ke₄
ub-šè ib-ši-bar ub im-sug₄
da-šè ib-ši-bar da im-sug₄
a-me kalam-ma-šè im-ši-bar a-me-bi im-sug₄
ĝiš hašur-ra-ke₄ gú ke₄ mu-ni-ib-gar
igi lú-ùlu mu-un-ši-in-bar-ra-zu
lú-ùlu pa-ḫal-la mu-un-ši-in-bar-ra-zu
lú uru-bar-ra-ke₄ mu-un-ši-in-bar-ra-zu
lú uru-šà-ga-ke₄ mu-un- ši-bar-ra-zu

[The evil working eye of a restless person,
Looked into the corner (of the house), made the corner empty,
Looked at the side (of the house), made the side empty,
Looked into the living quarters of the land and made the living quarters of
the land empty,
It made the man bend his neck like a tree.
The human eye that looked at you
The one that looked at you to cause evil
The one that looked at you outside of town
The one that looked at you in the centre of town.]⁴¹

A bilingual version of the text, CT 17, 33, also describes ritual action by the god Enki, who symbolically cleans the patient with bread by rubbing it on his head and body while also uttering ritual formulas. These descriptions of ritual action were probably secondary expansions, however, since they are absent in Old Babylonian versions of the incantation. However, a fragmentary Old Babylonian text with the subscript *ka-inim-ma igi-ḫul-kam*, “incantation against the evil eye,” includes the prescription to “wipe of the body of the man, son of his god,” which suggests that such ritual actions were practiced in the Old Babylonian period.⁴² More commonly, however, earlier versions contained imprecations. A forerunner to the expanded bilingual CT 17, 33 from ancient Meturan, for example, describes the symbolic piercing of the evil eye by Nintinuga and her children:

⁴¹ CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1993, Vol. 83, No. 1, pp. 195–199; cf. SCHRAMM, W. *Ein Compendium sumerisch-akkadischer Beschwörungen*, pp. 54–57.

⁴² THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 29.

^dnin-tin-ugs-ga gi hu-mu-un-dù
^dda-mu dur₁₀-tab-ba hu-mu-un-sàg-ga
^dgu-nu-ra dimgul gal-bi hu-mu-un-dar-ra

[May Nintinuga pierce him with a reed,
 May Damu kill him with a double axe,
 May Gunura pierce him with a stake.]⁴³

Similarly, in another Old Babylonian incantation against the evil eye, YOS 11, 70 I 15'–23', the text contains the imprecatory formula:

igi-hul lú-níg-hul-dím-ma gud-gin₇ he-em-gaz-gaz

[May the evil eye of the evildoer be slaughtered like a bull.]⁴⁴

In an incantation against snakes from the Old Babylonian period, mention is made of an evil eyed snake, which suggests that not only humans, but also animals were believed to possess the evil eye:

*muš igi-babbar muš igi-kukku₂ muš igi-si₄-a muš igi-'gùn-gùn'
 muš igi-'sig₇-sig₇' muš igi-hul muš igi-sa₆-ga muš [...]
 muš igi-DU₃ [...]
^dasar-lú-hi dumu [...]*

[The white-eyed snake, the black-eyed snake, the red-eyed snake, the snake with multi-coloured eyes,
 The snake with yellow-green eyes, the snake with the evil eye, the snake with the good eye, the snake [...]
 The snake with [...] eyes
 Asarluhi, the son of [Enki saw it]⁴⁵

Another Old Babylonian incantation, YOS 11, 70 I 1'–14', identified as an evil eye spell (*ka-inim-ma igi hul-kam*), also associates the eye with animals:

⁴³ CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1993, Vol. 83, No. 1, pp. 198–199; SCHRAMM, W. *Ein Compendium sumerisch-akkadischer Beschwörungen*, pp. 56–57.

⁴⁴ CUNNINGHAM, G. *Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations, 2500 – 1500 BC*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ VELDHUIS, N. C. Comments on *igi-hul*. In *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires*, 1992, Vol. 43, p. 33.

*igi gud aš-àm igi udu-àm
igi lú šár-àm ka lú šár-àm
igi hul-àm niġ nam-hul-hul*

[The eye is a single ox, the eye is a (single) sheep,
The eye is numerous men, the mouth is numerous men,
The eye is evil, the most evil thing]⁴⁶

Geller⁴⁷ opines that the “single ox” and “single sheep” are weak metaphors, and propose reading these lines as “each face is an ox, each face is passing by, the face is like that of many men, the voice is like that of many men, the face is evil and always means evil,” where the “face” and “voice” refer to hallucinations. However, in an incantation against the evil tongue from ancient Meturan, the evil eye and tongue again seem to be associated with animals. Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi⁴⁸ point to the opposition of three couples in the text, namely the sky-earth, many-single, and cow-sheep:

*an-ša-ar ki-ša-ar ki e-me gud-e-ša e-me du-te-ša
e-me nam-lú-ùlu ú hul ninda hul-lu
igi nam-lú-ùlu ù-gidim hul-hul*

[The edge of the sky, the edge of the earth, the tongue of the single ox,
the tongue of the single sheep,
The human tongue which spoils the herbs, which spoils the bread,
The human eye which decomposes the stature.]⁴⁹

Similarly, in another Old Babylonian evil eye incantation, YOS 11, 70 I 24'-25', the evil eye is described as various animals, pointing to the concept THE EVIL EYE IS A DANGEROUS ANIMAL:

*igi gud huš ug huš igi lú-ùlu
gud huš ug huš*

⁴⁶ THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 25.

⁴⁷ GELLER, M. J. Paranoia, the evil eye, and the face of evil. In SALLABERGER, W., VOLK, K., ZGOLL, A. (eds.). *Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien: Festschrift für Claus Wilke*, p. 120.

⁴⁸ CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). Troisième partie. In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1995, Vol. 85, No. 2, p. 173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 169–173.

[The eye (is) a dangerous ox, a fierce lion, the eye of man (is),
A dangerous ox, a fierce lion.]⁵⁰

The first tablet of the New Assyrian medical compendium for diseases of the eye introduces several Akkadian incantations with lines in fantasy Sumerian mentioning the evil eye. Veldhuis⁵¹ suggests that these seemingly nonsensical references should not be dismissed as devoid of meaning. Although the lines cannot be translated due to their lack of grammar and syntax, they do bear meaning by listing verbs that may allude to the deleterious effects of the evil eye, such as *bar* “to split,” *bir* “to destroy” and *sub₃* “to blur.”

In the New Assyrian compendium of baby incantations, the evil eye is again mentioned in a bilingual incantation. Interestingly, the Sumerian text has *inim hul* “evil word” while the Akkadian has *īnam lemuttam* “evil eye.” It has been suggested that this translation was based on the phonological association between Sumerian *inim* and Akkadian *īnam*. As will be demonstrated below, the evil eye is frequently mentioned in parallel with the evil “mouth” or “tongue” in Sumerian incantation literature:

akkil-gin₇ zabar inim-hul hé-em-ma-an-gaz

[Like a lament may the bronze smash the evil word]⁵²

In an Old Babylonian incantation against evil demons, the evil eye is again listed in parallel with the evil mouth and evil tongue. Like witchcraft, it is closely associated with poison, pointing to the concept THE EVIL EYE IS POISON:

[uš₁₁ hu]l-bi-ta su-na gál-la-na
[áš-hu]l su-na ù gál-la-na
[hul nam]-tag-g[a su-na gál-la-na]
[uš₁₁ na]m-’tag’-[ga ugu-na gál-la-na]
[hul-a mu]-’un-gá’-g[á]

⁵⁰ THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 25; cf. GELLER, M. J. Paranoia, the evil eye, and the face of evil. In SALLABERGER, W., VOLK, K., ZGOLL, A. (eds.). *Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien: Festschrift für Claus Wilke*, p. 120.

⁵¹ VELDHUIS, N. C. Comments on *igi-hul*. In *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires*, 1992, Vol. 43, p. 33–34.

⁵² GELLER, M. Review of Farber, W. Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf! Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und-Rituale. In *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 1990, Vol. 37, p. 134.

[*lú-ḫul igi-ḫu*]l *ka-ḫul eme-ḫ[ul]*
[...] *x'-ḫul u₈-a mi-ni-in-gar-re'-e[š]*

[Since venom with its evil exists in his body,
Or since an evil curse exists in his body,
Or since the evil of transgression exists in his body,
Or since the venom of transgression exists in his head,
They (the evil demons) have placed evil upon him,
And the evil man, the evil eye, the evil mouth, the evil tongue,
And the evil x [...] have placed woe on him.]⁵³

Another Sumerian incantation from the Old Babylonian period, directed against illness, also mentions the evil eye in parallel with the witch, evil demons, and the evil mouth and tongue. This suggests that curses and the evil eye, as witchcraft techniques, were believed to be reinforced by demonic support:

udug-ḫul gal₅-lá-ḫul [...] *lú-ḫul igi-ḫul ka-ḫul eme-ḫul uš₁₁-ri níĝ-ak-a-ḫul-dim-ma bar-šè ḫé-em-da-gub*

[May the evil udug, the evil galla [...] the evil man, the evil eye, the evil mouth, the evil tongue, the witch (and) the warlock stand aside.]⁵⁴

In several instances the evil eye is mentioned explicitly in the context of witchcraft. For example, in the *bīt rimki* series, the evil eye is mentioned in parallel with the evil mouth, tongue, and sorcery:

lú ka-ḫul-ĝál-e nam bi-in-tar-ru-da
[*lú e*]me-ḫul-ĝál-e áš-bala mu-un-na-ab-dug₄-ga
lú igi-ḫul-ĝál-e igi-ḫuš ba-an-ši-ib-il-la
lú uš_{11/12}-ri-a sa-bi ba-an-sar-re
lú níĝ-ak-a ḫe bí-in-dab-dab-bé

[The one whom an evil mouth slighted,
The one whom an evil tongue cursed,
The one at whom an evil eye glared irately,
The one whom witchcraft tied,
The one whom sorcery destroyed.]⁵⁵

⁵³ CUNNINGHAM, G. *Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations, 2500 – 1500 BC*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

In a spell against sorcery from ancient Meturan, the evil eye is also associated with witchcraft. Described in tempest imagery, the text points to the concept THE EVIL EYE IS A STORM:

ḥul-gál igi nu-sa dumu uš-uš-šu-ke₄
uš-zu líl wu-wu dumu ^dereš-ki<-gal>-la-ka-ke₄

[The evil, the evil eye, the child of the tempest that covers all
The sorcerer, the wind that blows, the child of Ereshkigal.]⁵⁶

In a Sumerian incantation against witchcraft from the Old Babylonian period the evil eye is again associated with storm imagery, sorcery, and demonic activity.⁵⁷ The text has the typical structure of the Marduk-Ea type of spells, namely an initial description of evil activities, Enki's ritual instructions to his son Asalluḫi, and a final part, which in this case constitutes a series of curses against the witch. The initial lines describe the evil eye as an independent entity and compares it to a líl-demon:

ù ḥul-gál igi ḥul dumu ḥa-lam-ma-ke₄
uš₇-zu uš₇-ri šu dag-dag-ge nita líl-lá-àm ì-bu-bu
ki-sikil ḡuruš šu-dù-a á lá-e-dè

[The evil one, evil eye, child of destruction,
Roaming with witchcraft and magic, she is flying about like a male líl-demon,
In order to bind the ensnared young woman and man.]⁵⁸

In a bilingual version of this text, the Akkadian translation interprets the unspecific ḥul-gál, “evil one” as the female *lilītu* demon, so that the evil eye becomes an attribute of this wind-demon.⁵⁹ This interpretation may have been triggered by the description of the witch as a wind-like evil force that is compared to the male líl-demon.

⁵⁵ BORGER, R. Das dritte “Haus” der Serie bīt rimki (VR 50–51, Schollmeyer HGŠ NR. 1). In *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 1967, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 12–13.

⁵⁶ CAVIGNEAUX, A., AL-RAWI, F. N. H. Textes magiques de Tell Haddad (Textes de Tell Haddad II). Deuxième partie. In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1995, Vol. 85, No. 1, pp. 20, 28.

⁵⁷ ABUSCH, I. T. et al. *Corpus of Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft rituals. Volume two*, pp. 112ff.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 126.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to conclude that the evil eye was a developed belief system in ancient Mesopotamia and that much more can be learned about its possessors, mechanisms of action, and ways of protection against its effects in future research. The foregoing selection of references demonstrate that possessors were believed to be humans, including family members, animals, such as snakes, monkeys, sheep, oxen, lions, and demons. Several idiomatic expressions also associate the evil eye closely with envy. Abundance, wealth, and other enviable qualities were therefore believed to attract the evil eye. Interestingly, the evil eye was also believed to have the potential to harm its possessor. Further, the evil eye was intricately linked with the evil word and therefore commonly mentioned in the context of witchcraft. Like curses and sorcery, the evil eye was conceptually linked with poison. When it comes to protection, the ancient Sumerians used imprecations and rituals to destroy the evil eye and eliminate its effects.

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