

## THE EVIL EYE OF SUMERIAN DEITIES

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The evil eye in ancient Mesopotamia has received surprisingly little attention in recent research. It has been suggested that the belief in the malefic gaze was much less prevalent in ancient Mesopotamia than initially thought by earlier generations of scholars. Unfortunately, though, recent scholarship has focused exclusively on the relatively small corpus of evil eye incantations from ancient Mesopotamia. This study attempts to add to the understanding of this ancient belief system by analysing the conceptual content of linguistic expressions for the evil eye of gods and goddesses in Sumerian literature.

**Keywords:** Evil eye, Sumerian deities, cognitive linguistics.

The evil eye is a widespread folk concept that the glance of certain people, gods, animals, and mythological figures can cause injury, illness, or death. It is millennia old and due to its long history of existence is one of the most influential and most complex belief systems in the world. Elliott<sup>1</sup> suggests that the evil eye originated in the ancient Near Eastern and circum-Mediterranean area where it is first encountered in the Sumerian literary record in the third millennium BCE. Mesopotamian art predating the Sumerian incantations against the evil eye suggests that the belief extends to periods of prehistory.<sup>2</sup> It was also a central belief in ancient Egypt where the myth of Horus's restored eye served as a cultural explanation for the efficacy of the ubiquitous evil eye amulets. The belief also pervaded the poetry, drama, literature, and art of ancient Greece and Rome. It is even encountered throughout the Christian Bible

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<sup>1</sup> ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> VAN BUREN, E. D. New evidence concerning an eye-divinity. In *Iraq*, 1955, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 164–175.

and alluded to in the Qur'an. Among Muslims, Christians, and Jews the evil eye is usually inextricably linked with envy, although the biblical writings also link it with miserliness, a begrudging spirit, and a lack of generosity.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, some cultures even associate it with positive states of mind, such as admiration and love.<sup>4</sup>

In prescientific societies where the relationship between bacterial and viral causes of illnesses was unknown traditional healers were quick to ascribe ailments and misfortune in general to supernatural causes. Seligmann<sup>5</sup> points out that the physiology and biology of vision was also an enigma to the educated people of the ancient world. Their literature testifies to the fantastical powers that were ascribed to the organ of vision, which, through the millennia, seemed to retain mysterious qualities. Ross<sup>6</sup> suggests that evil eye beliefs are based on the extramission theory of vision, which in turn derives from the sense of being stared at. Every race shares the idea that the human eye penetrates or pierces. In English this concept survived in linguistic vehicles such as a *penetrating gaze*, *withering glance*, *dirty look*, *looking askance*, *looking daggers*, etcetera.<sup>7</sup> Although awareness of being stared at may be a common experience, the extramission theory of vision does not have much basis in physiological reality. Ross<sup>8</sup> has demonstrated that the eye does emit electromagnetic signals, which he cites as scientific proof for the basis of evil eye beliefs. However, the low frequency of these emissions can hardly account for the devastating effects that have been ascribed to the act of vision during the course of history:

According to the extramission theory of vision, the particles or rays emitted by the eye can wreck harm just as the rays of the sun. A glaring, staring eye, a penetrating gaze, can burn, wither, reduce to ashes, zap, hurt, injure, damage, or destroy any object struck by the ocular emanations. An evil eye was feared as a major cause of illness and death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> SELIGMANN, S. *Der böse Blick und Verwandtes. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiter und Völker*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> ROSS, C. A. Hypothesis: The electrophysiological basis of the evil eye belief. In *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 2010, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> ROSS, C. A. Hypothesis: The electrophysiological basis of the evil eye belief. In *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 2010, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> ELLIOTT, J. H. *Beware the evil eye: The evil eye in the Bible and the ancient world. Volume 1: Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*, p. 23.

This theory of the devastating effect of the gaze in terms of the extramission theory had been described in detail by ancient philosophers, such as Plato, Euclid, and Ptolemy. However, it is also commonly encountered in the literature of ancient Mesopotamia where the eyes of gods, supernatural beings, animals, and humans were believed to cause illness, death, and damage on a large scale. Unfortunately, however, most research on the evil eye in Mesopotamia has not ventured beyond incantation literature where the malefic gaze is specifically mentioned.

### **Research on the evil eye in Sumerian literature: an overview**

Investigations on the scope and nature of the evil eye in Sumerian literature have focused almost exclusively on spells unambiguously directed against the evil eye. Ebeling<sup>10</sup> lists three Sumerian incantations against the evil eye together with another composed in Akkadian in his study on incantations against the enemy and the evil eye in ancient Mesopotamia. Only two of the Sumerian incantations (TCL 16, 89; BL 3) are specifically directed against the evil eye while the third (VAT 13683) is grouped with the eye spells on account of the fact that it repeatedly mentions the eye being filled with lapis lazuli, which Ebeling<sup>11</sup> interprets as sufficient evidence that the spell was intended to ward off the evil eye on account of the fact that lapis lazuli was commonly used in the ancient Near East as an apotropaic against the evil eye. The first two incantations demonstrate remarkable similarities, although they are not exact copies. Both texts begin by associating the evil eye with a red snake (*muš-ḥuš*), or dragon, and an evil man (*lu<sub>2</sub> ḥul*):

*Igi muš-ḥuš igi lu<sub>2</sub>-ulu<sub>3</sub> muš-ḥuš*  
*igi lu<sub>2</sub> nig-ḥul dim-ma muš-ḥuš*

[The eye (is in the shape of) a red snake, the eye of the man (is) a red snake,  
the eye of the evil man is a red snake.]

The approach of the evil eye is associated with natural disaster and misfortune on a grand scale in both texts. In TCL 16, 89 it is said to cause

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<sup>10</sup> EBELING, E. Beschwörungen gegen den Feind und den bösen Blick aus dem Zweistromlande. In *Archiv Orientalní*, 1949, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 207–211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

draught, the loss of crops and harvest, loss of strength, and even clothing.<sup>12</sup> BL 3 lists similar effects, but also includes the loss of livestock.<sup>13</sup>

Thomsen<sup>14</sup> criticises Ebeling and other scholars of earlier generations for claiming that the belief in the evil eye was widespread in ancient Mesopotamia. Like Ebeling, however, she also limits her investigation to incantations against the evil eye. She identifies five Sumerian incantations, one bilingual incantation, one Akkadian incantation, and ten references to the evil eye in other incantations against witchcraft in general. Because of her limited focus on the corpus of incantation literature, she associates the evil eye in Mesopotamia with witchcraft and sorcery. However, she also contrasts the evil eye with witchcraft, suggesting that the effects described in the two Sumerian incantations published by Ebeling are benign – accidents, situations which might happen to anyone at any time – compared to that of witchcraft, which often resulted in conflicts with family, illness, and even death.<sup>15</sup> This seems to be a matter of opinion, however, since drought, the loss of livestock and crops, etcetera may have been much more injurious to a farmer in ancient Sumer than some quarrel with family or an obscure illness. A further limitation resulting from this exclusive focus on spells is that she overlooks the numerous references to the malevolent eye of divinities in the Sumerian literary corpus.

Geller,<sup>16</sup> also restricting his investigation to the corpus of incantation literature, suggests translating Sumerian *igi hul* with “evil face”, rather than “evil eye”, since, according to him, the evil eye may not have been a Sumerian concept at all. In his view Sumerian evil eye incantations describe hallucinations rather than the evil eye as a cultural belief system. He cites the association of the eye with the red snake, or monster, in TCL 16, 89 and BL 3 as proof for this theory. In addition, he follows Thomsen in her opinion that the effects of the evil eye in these incantations are mostly of natural origin and does not involve envy, illness, or other effects one would expect in the context of witchcraft and the evil eye. In my view, this testifies to a very constricted understanding of the evil eye concept. Although it cannot be disproven that the Sumerian incantation priests used the known incantations to treat patients suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, it can hardly be denied that the ancient

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 19–20.

<sup>15</sup> THOMSEN, M.-L. The evil eye in Mesopotamia. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1992, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> 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. 115–134.

Sumerians believed that visual action could have deleterious effects. In fact, it is likely that ancient Sumerian notions of the agency of the eye may have influenced and motivated many of the evil eye concepts as they have developed among the Semitic and circum-Mediterranean cultures. In order to come to a nuanced understanding of the ancient Sumerian evil eye belief one has to extend the investigation to material outside of the limited number of incantations that make specific reference to the phenomenon. In addition, rather than confining research to overt references to the evil eye (igi ħul) one needs to also consider the numerous Sumerian expressions for visual action in contexts where it clearly has injurious effects. Since many of these linguistic expressions are metaphorical in nature the cognitive linguistic approach to the study of language with its cognitive metaphor theory seems to be an ideal tool for the purposes of such an investigation.

### **A cognitive linguistic approach**

Cognitive linguistics constitutes an approach to the study of language that emerged in the 1970s and has grown as a discipline ever since. It is based on the assumption that language, rather than being an autonomous faculty, is grounded in experience.<sup>17</sup> It focuses on the ways in which natural language serves as an instrument for the organisation, processing, and conveying of information. Rather than just mirroring objective experience, language imposes a structure on the world that reflects the needs, interests, and experiences of individuals and cultures.<sup>18</sup> Cognitive linguistics emphasises the fact that language activity is a creative process that draws on cultural resources and cognitive skills, such as the construal of cognitive models, the coordination of large arrays of information, and the creation of creative mappings, cognitive transfers, and elaborations.<sup>19</sup> Although a fair deal of research has been done on the role of cognitive operations in the construction of grammatical elements, the bulk of the cognitive linguistic enterprise has focused on the creative operational construction of meaning in everyday discourse. Aspects of language that had previously been regarded as largely limited to creative and poetic speech, such as metaphor and metonymy, are now considered by cognitive linguists to be

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<sup>17</sup> LAKOFF, G., JOHNSON, M. Conceptual metaphor in everyday language. In *Journal of Philosophy*, 1980, Vol. 77, No. 8, p. 453.

<sup>18</sup> GEERAERTS, D., CUYCKENS, H. Introducing cognitive linguistics. In GEERAERTS, D., CUYCKENS, H. (eds.). *The Oxford handbook of cognitive linguistics*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> FAUCONNIER, G. Cognitive Linguistics. In NADEL, L. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, pp. 1–2.

powerful conceptual mappings at the very core of human thought and ordinary speech. A fundamental theme in cognitive linguistics is the cognitive theory of metaphor.

During the course of the last four decades, cognitive linguists have demonstrated that metaphor is constitutive for all the thinking that we do. In the course of evolution, the metaphorical transfer of knowledge, drawing on embodied experience, actions, and emotions, enabled humans to think and reason abstractly. It has been demonstrated convincingly that embodied human experience provide a rich source of conceptual content that is systematically used to structure target domains by means of metaphorical mappings.<sup>20</sup> Language is a valuable tool for research on the conceptual systems in terms of which we think and act. Lakoff and Johnson<sup>21</sup> mention the example of the concept ARGUMENT IS WAR,<sup>22</sup> which is pervasive in American English. It is reflected in a variety of everyday expressions, such as “your argument is indefensible”, “he attacked every weak point in my argument”, “I demolished his argument”, and “his criticisms were right on target”. Although it is common for Americans to think of argumentation in terms of their concepts and experience of war, it is important to realise that other cultures may conceptualise argumentation in a different way, or even avoid the concept altogether. Lakoff and Johnson<sup>23</sup> explain:

Try to imagine a culture where arguments were not viewed in terms of war, where no one won or lost, where there was no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, with the participants as performers, and the goal being to perform in a balanced and aesthetic way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But we would not view them as arguing at all. It would be strange even to call what they were doing “arguing”.

The fact that metaphorical language, although universally based on embodied experience, is ultimately culturally determined is important to bear in mind when studying the literature of ancient cultures. The prescientific notion that the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>21</sup> LAKOFF, G., JOHNSON, M. Conceptual metaphor in everyday language. In *Journal of Philosophy*, 1980, Vol. 77, No. 8, p. 454.

<sup>22</sup> Following convention in the cognitive linguistic enterprise, concepts will be rendered in small capital letters to distinguish them from linguistic vehicles of conceptual content.

<sup>23</sup> LAKOFF, G., JOHNSON, M. Conceptual metaphor in everyday language. In *Journal of Philosophy*, 1980, Vol. 77, No. 8, p. 455.

eye emits light and substance is foreign to English speakers of the 21st century. For this reason, the numerous linguistic expressions in ancient Sumerian for the act of vision may be mistaken to be mere vehicles for the act of seeing, or maybe metaphors for the emotion of anger at best. However, as will be demonstrated below, the contexts in which these expressions are used clearly suggest that the ancient Sumerians believed that the eyes of various divinities could cause severe damage, or even death.

### Sumerian concepts of the evil eye

Since Assyriologists have limited the evil eye in ancient Mesopotamia to the domain of witchcraft and the actions of malevolent human beings, this study will focus on selected examples relating to the evil eye of Sumerian deities outside of the corpus of incantation literature in order to add to the existing knowledge of the evil eye concept in ancient Sumer. Several linguistic expressions that describe the malefic gaze of gods and goddesses can be identified in mythological and praise compositions. These acts of baleful vision are associated with various inauspicious outcomes, such as death, destruction, and dread.

The expression “the eye of death” (i-bi<sub>2</sub> uš<sub>2</sub>-a) occurs twice in the story of Inanna’s descent into the netherworld. The eye is clearly used as a metonym for the action of vision (organ for action), while the verb “to die” (uš<sub>2</sub>) evidently refers to the effect on the person being looked at. The conceptual metaphor conveyed by this linguistic vehicle can therefore be rendered: GLARING CAUSES DEATH. In the first occurrence Inanna is the victim of the evil eye of the Anunna-gods and in the second instance she is the visual perpetrator, killing her husband, Dumuzi, with her eye of death:

*igi mu-ši-in-bar i-bi<sub>2</sub> uš<sub>2</sub>-a-kam*  
*inim i-ne-ne inim lipiš giġ-ga-am<sub>3</sub>*  
*gu<sub>3</sub> i-ne-de<sub>2</sub> gu<sub>3</sub> nam-tag-tag-ga-am<sub>3</sub>*  
*munus tur<sub>5</sub>-ra uzu niġ<sub>2</sub> sag<sub>3</sub>-ga-še<sub>3</sub> ba-an-kur<sub>9</sub>*  
*uzu niġ<sub>2</sub> sag<sub>3</sub>-ga<sup>gis</sup> gag-ta lu<sub>2</sub> ba-da-an-la<sub>2</sub>*

[They looked at her – it was the eye of death  
They spoke to her – it was the speech of illness  
They shouted at her – it was the shout of damnation

The afflicted woman became a corpse  
The corpse was hung on a hook.]<sup>24</sup>

It is not entirely clear why Inanna undertook her journey to the underworld, ruled over by her sister, Ereshkigal, and her husband, Nergal. Although she possessed much power and riches she may have been driven by greed, since upon arriving she made her sister leave her throne and occupied it herself. This greed of Inanna prompted the seven Anunna-gods, who acted as judges, to kill her with the evil eye and spells. In this context it is interesting to note that Sumerian wisdom teaches that insatiability and envy lead to misfortune and death. Nevertheless, before entering the underworld Inanna instructed her servant, Ninshubur, to plead with several gods to come to her rescue should anything go awry. After three days passed Ninshubur managed to convince the god Enki to revive and save Inanna with the help of two beings that he created for this specific purpose. However, in order to escape the underworld, Inanna would have to present a substitute, since no-one who enters the underworld may ever return. This lot fell on Dumuzi, Inanna's husband, since he seemed to enjoy himself rather than mourn her absence and death. In language echoing the account of her death in the underworld, she kills Dumuzi with her evil eye and the words of her mouth:

*igi mu-un-ši-in-bar igi uš<sub>2</sub>-a-ka*  
*inim i-ne-ne inim lipiš gig-ga*  
*gu<sub>3</sub> i-ne-de<sub>2</sub> gu<sub>3</sub> nam-tag-tag-ga*

[She looked at him – it was the eye of death  
She spoke to him – it was the word of illness  
She shouted at him – it was the shout of damnation.]<sup>25</sup>

This led to Dumuzi's demise and he was promptly taken away to the underworld to replace Inanna. Interestingly, the "look of death" is also ascribed to the Huwawa monster in the tale of Gilgamesh and Huwawa.<sup>26</sup> In this

<sup>24</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. Inana's descent to the nether world. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 1.4.1, lines 168–172 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>25</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. Inana's descent to the nether world. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*[online], c. 1.4.1, lines 354–356 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. BLACK, J. A. et al. Gilgameš and Huwawa (Version A). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*[online], c. 1.8.1.5, line 123 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

intertextual use of the expression, however, the evil eye of the monster does not kill Gilgamesh, but only induces fear.

There are numerous linguistic expressions and literary accounts that describe the eyes of gods and goddesses as causing not only death, but also destruction on a large scale. These are best understood as descriptions of the evil eye of Sumerian deities. The god Enlil, for example, looks balefully at Sumer causing a flood in the Eridu lament. The linguistic vehicle is comprised of the usual “eye” (i-bi<sub>2</sub>) as metonym for the action of looking, followed by the verb “to be bad” (hul) and the verb “to set aside” (bar), which most commonly stands together with “eye” to denote vision. The account seems to suggest that the evil eye of Enlil caused the flood that destroyed the city, hinting at the concept GLARING CAUSES DESTRUCTION:

*u<sub>3</sub>-[mu-un]<sup>d</sup> mu-ul-lil<sub>2</sub> lugal kur-kur-ra-ke<sub>4</sub>  
ki-/en\-[gi]-/ra\ i-bi<sub>2</sub> hul he<sub>2</sub>-en-ši-bar ġiri<sub>3</sub>-bal-a he<sub>2</sub>-em-gul*

[Lord Enlil, king of all the lands, looked with an evil eye (i-bi<sub>2</sub> hul bar) at Sumer, destroying it with a flood.]<sup>27</sup>

Another linguistic vehicle for the concept of the evil eye that occurs in the Eridu lament is “the eye goes around” (igi niġin<sub>2</sub>). This combination is commonly translated with “devastation”. However, in incantations against the evil eye the eye (igi) is often said to roam about independently causing destruction wherever it goes.<sup>28</sup> The eye going around causing confusion and destruction in Eridu may therefore be interpreted as the evil eye as an independent entity:

*eridug<sup>ki</sup>-ga igi ni<sub>10</sub>-ni<sub>10</sub>-bi ba-kur<sub>2</sub> šu suh<sub>3</sub>-a ba-ab-dug<sub>4</sub>*

[In Eridu everything was destroyed by the evil eye (igi niġin<sub>2</sub>) and turned to confusion.]<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. The lament for Eridug. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.2.6, Segment C, lines 3–4 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>28</sup> FORD, J. N. ‘Ninety-nine by the evil eye and one from natural causes’. In *Ugarit-Forschungen*, 1998, Vol. 30, pp. 201–278.

<sup>29</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. The lament for Eridug. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.2.6, Segment A, line 18 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

The same expression is also found in the lament for Sumer and Urim. In this instance the evil eye is associated with the god Enlil:

*šag<sub>4</sub> nu-si-si igi niĝin<sub>2</sub>-bi iri-a ba-an-da-dab<sub>5</sub>*

[He afflicted the city with dissatisfaction and the evil eye (igi niĝin<sub>2</sub>).]<sup>30</sup>

Earlier in the same lament Enlil's evil eye (igi ħul) is attendant to widespread destruction caused by an invasion by the Gutium:

*<sup>d</sup>en-lil<sub>2</sub>-le e<sub>2</sub> zid gul-gul-lu-de<sub>3</sub> lu<sub>2</sub> zid tur-re-de<sub>3</sub>  
dumu lu<sub>2</sub> zid-da-ke<sub>4</sub> dumu-saĝ-e igi ħul dim<sub>2</sub>-me-de<sub>3</sub>  
ud-ba <sup>d</sup>en-lil<sub>2</sub>-le gu-ti-um<sup>ki</sup> kur-ta im-ta-an-ed<sub>3</sub>  
DU-bi a-ma-ru <sup>d</sup>en-lil<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub> gaba gi<sub>4</sub> nu-tuku-am<sub>3</sub>*

[Enlil, to destroy the loyal households, to decimate the loyal men, to put the evil eye on the sons of the loyal men, on the first-born, Enlil then sent down Gutium from the mountains. Their advance was as the flood of Enlil that cannot be withstood.]<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, in a praise poem of Šulgi, the eye of the god Enki is said to be especially devastating. The linguistic vehicle in this instance is comprised of the usual word for eye as metonym for the act of vision (igi) and the verb “to lift” (il<sub>2</sub>):

*lugal <sup>d</sup>en-ki-ke<sub>4</sub> abzu-ta igi l(AŠ) mu-il<sub>2</sub>  
[ki]-gub-ba-ni kur mu-na-gul-[e]  
ki-tuš-a-ni-ta iri mu-na-gul-e*

[King Enki emerges from the abzu; he has to raise (il<sub>2</sub>) but one eye (igi) from the abzu to destroy for him the foreign lands from where he stands, to destroy for him the cities from where he sits.]<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. The lament for Sumer and Urim. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.2.3, line 299 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>31</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. The lament for Sumer and Urim. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.2.3, lines 73–76 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>32</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. A praise poem of Šulgi (Šulgi D). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.4.2.04, lines 313–315 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

In the same way, the eye of the goddess Ninisina is said to rip the flesh of the enemy. The linguistic expression used in this instance is a combination of the word for “eye” (igi), the verb “to be red” (ḥuš), and the verb “to lift” (il<sub>2</sub>). Although this idiom acts as a vehicle for the concept of anger it is clearly associated with severe bodily damage to the object of vision. In fact, rather than hinting at the concept of anger, the redness of the eye may serve to add to the concept of heat emitting from the eye, which, like fire, causes harm to the object of vision. It therefore serves equally well as a vehicle for the concept GLARING CAUSES DAMAGE:

... igi /ḥuš il<sub>2</sub>-la-ni erim<sub>2</sub>-ma su dar-dar-re

[... whose furious gaze (igi ḥuš il<sub>2</sub>) burns the flesh of the enemy ...]<sup>33</sup>

The terrifying gaze of deities is a common theme in ancient Sumerian praise literature. In these texts the emphasis is less on physical harm and destruction caused to the objects of vision and more on the terrifying effect of the god or goddess' evil eye. The malicious glare of the god Enki, conveyed by the linguistic expression “to lift the eye” (igi il<sub>2</sub>), causes an earthquake in the composition “Enki and the world order”. It seems likely that the ancient Sumerians interpreted lightning bolts as the visual action of their gods. The quaking of the earth in this context therefore probably refers to the rumbling of the earth in a thunderstorm:

[<sup>d</sup>en]-ki igi l il<sub>2</sub>-la-ni kur-šag<sub>4</sub>-ge di-di

[A single look (igi il<sub>2</sub>) of Enki makes the hills rumble.]<sup>34</sup>

The same linguistic expression, “to lift the eye” (igi il<sub>2</sub>), is used with reference to the god Enlil in “Enlil in the E-kur (mountain house)”:

... igi il<sub>2</sub>-la-ni kur-re di-di

[... his glance makes the hills quiver.]<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. A šir-namerima for Iddin-Dagan (Iddin-Dagan D). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.5.3.4, line 4 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>34</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. Enki and the world order. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 1.1.3, line 11 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

In “An adab to Ninurta for Lipit-Eštar” the evil eye of the god Ninurta strikes fear into the heart of his enemies. In this instance the Sumerian word for eye (igi) combines with the verb “to be frightened” (ḫuluḫ), metonymically used to describe the effect that Ninurta’s eye has on his enemies. The concept conveyed is THE GLANCE (OF GODS) IS DANGEROUS:

*mur ša<sub>4</sub>-zu /inim dug<sub>4</sub>-ga-zu-še<sub>3</sub> /kur\-[kur] ni<sub>2</sub>-ba ḫu-/mu\-[gam]-/de<sub>3</sub>\*  
*[igi] ḫu-luḫ-ḫa-zu-ne gu<sub>2</sub>-erim<sub>2</sub>-ĝal<sub>2</sub> su ḫe<sub>2</sub>-em-da-sag<sub>3</sub>-ge-de*

[Your roaring and commands make all the foreign countries submit. Your evil eye (igi ḫuluḫ) makes all your enemies tremble.]<sup>36</sup>

The goddess Inanna’s glare also has frightening consequences. The noun igi “eye” combines with the verb suḫ “to tear out” to denote the angry, malefic gaze of the goddess – probably associated with the dark clouds of a thunderstorm:

*igi suḫ-a-zu dadag-ga ku<sub>10</sub>-ku<sub>10</sub> an-bar<sub>7</sub> mul-sig<sub>7</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> mu-un-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>*

[At your evil eye (igi suḫ) what is bright darkens. You replace midday with darkness.]<sup>37</sup>

In another hymn to Inanna the Sumerian word for eye is used with the verb “to be reddish” (ḫuš) to describe the terrifying glance of the celebrated goddess. Even the Anunna gods flee from her frightening countenance. The fact that they are compared to bats adds to the image of Inanna’s blinding radiance emitting from her eyes:

*nin-ĝu<sub>10</sub><sup>d</sup> a-nun-na diĝir gal-gal-e-ne*  
*su-din<sup>mušen</sup> dal-la-gin<sub>7</sub> du<sub>6</sub>-de<sub>3</sub> mu-e-ši-ib-ra-aš*  
*igi ḫuš-a-za la-ba-sug<sub>2</sub>-ge-de<sub>3</sub>-eš*  
*saĝ-ki ḫuš-a-za saĝ nu-mu-un-de<sub>3</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>*

<sup>35</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. Enki and the world order. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 4.05.1, line 3 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>36</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. An adab to Ninurta for Lipit-Eštar (Lipit-Eštar D). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 2.5.5.4, lines 17–18 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

<sup>37</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. A hymn to Inana (Inana C). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 4.07.3, line 177 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

[My lady, the great Anunna gods fly from you to the ruin mounds like scudding bats. They dare not stand before your evil eye (igi huš). They dare not confront your terrible countenance.]<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The foregoing examples demonstrate that the evil eye concept cannot be restricted to the few spells against the malevolent eye in Sumerian literature. Furthermore, the cultural theory is not limited to the domain of witchcraft and the action of evil human beings, as had been suggested by Thomsen, but is commonly associated with various prominent gods of the Sumerian pantheon. One may argue, from a Euro-centric, etic perspective, that the authors of these texts suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and delusions when they composed mythological stories of gods dying as a result of the evil eye, or interpreted natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, storms, and invasions as the outcomes of the malefic vision of their gods. However, it seems more responsible to conclude, from an emic perspective, that the evil eye was indeed a central belief system of the ancient Sumerian culture that is widely reflected in their literature.

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<sup>38</sup> BLACK, J. A. et al. The exaltation of Inana (Inana B). *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* [online], c. 4.07.2, lines 34–37 [cit. 15 May 2016]. Available from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>>.

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