

Demon Tech Magic:
Considering Lamaštu Amulets as Technical Systems

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Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East

Spring 2022

Harvard Reference Style

Introduction

Lamaštu stands as being remarkable among ancient Mesopotamian malefic supernatural entities, commonly labelled as “demons” in the scholarship.¹ In the ancient literature she is referred to as Dimme in Sumerian and Lamaštu in Akkadian.² What makes Lamaštu uniquely infamous is that unlike the vast majority of demonic personages in Mesopotamian tradition, she is the only demon with a definitive personality, mythology, iconography, and constellation of destructive behaviors.³ Poignantly, her “specialty” is killing babies in order to devour their flesh.⁴ In addition to snatching and devouring infants, she is also known for attacking predominantly pregnant women, and is also responsible for fever and miscarriage.⁵ As such, in ancient Mesopotamia Lamaštu personified lethal danger and grievous misfortune, and significant technical measures were taken in an attempt to prevent her from inflicting harm to women as well as their in-utero fetuses or newborn infants.

This paper will examine the development of Lamaštu ritual amulet iconography beginning in the second millennium as delineated by Wiggermann’s four-part (A–D) classificatory scheme of increasing elaboration introduced in *Lamaštu, Daughter of Anu. A Profile* (2000). Wiggermann’s first two classes of amulet (A–B) will be correlated to Alfred Gell’s three types of technology, with the most sophisticated third class of amulet (C) analyzed in relation to magic, as outlined in Gell’s article *Technology and Magic* (1988). An introduction and background for Lamaštu is given with emphasis on her iconographic progression in texts and as depicted on amulets before reviewing Gell’s tripartite classifications of technical systems which will be followed by his interpretation of magic.

Development of Lamaštu Amulets

Specific ritual incantations against Lamaštu are extant from the early second millennium in the Middle Bronze Age and have been written in the Sumerian, Old Babylonian, and Old Assyrian languages.⁶ Based on fixed epithets and descriptive phrases, it has been suggested

¹ For discussion on the problematic nature of the term “demon” in the Mesopotamian context, see Konstantopoulos 2015: 11–15 and Konstantopoulos 2020.

² Properly Lamaštu (Akk.), dDÌM(.ME) (Sum.). See Wiggermann 2000: 217 for a thorough etymological analysis, in part suggesting *lamassu*, as potentially a loan from Sumerian *l a m a r*, as “(lower) goddess” which has bearing on her divine origin and subsequent demoted status, addressed in brief herein.

³ Wiggermann 2000: 217.

⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁵ Götting 2020: 185.

⁶ Wiggermann 2000: 217–218; incantations are paleographically identified in Old or Middle Babylonian and from the Lamastu series and Hulbazizi, “The Evil is Eradicated” series (see also 220, therein).

that the formation of her appearance likely originates from oral as opposed to written tradition.⁷

Apotropaic and exorcistic incantations from canonical texts are represented on amulets used in conjunction with, as well as in lieu of, these elaborate performances. Such rituals and corresponding amulets were intended to expel Lamaštu from the patient and their domicile back to the netherworld. While the textual image of Lamaštu is fully developed by the early second millennium,⁸ it remained iconographically variable until canonization, which seems to have occurred during the first millennium in Assyria.⁹ Subsequently, amulets migrated to the Levant as well as Southeastern Anatolia.¹⁰

Nevertheless, from the outset Lamaštu is depicted as possessing hybrid monstrous and anthropomorphic visual significations with Bronze Age texts mentioning Lamaštu as having the head of a dog/wolf or lion; the face of a bird of prey or *Anzu* (monstrous storm-bird or lion-headed eagle); teeth of a donkey; loosely hanging, unkempt hair; bare-breasted; with skin spotted like a leopard or a fish; sometimes winged; and on occasion tailed.¹¹

The iconographic development of the amulets through the Bronze and into the Iron Age have been categorized by Wiggermann (2000) as being comprised of four types:¹²

A) Late Bronze Age, attributable to southern sources (including Elam), Lamaštu is variable, especially the head, these are cursorily or lightly worked, possessing Old or Middle Babylonian inscriptions of incantations or from the Lamaštu series and Hulbazizi, “The Evil is Eradicated” series, pseudo-inscriptions also appear (Figs. 1–2 below).

B) Late Bronze Age, originating in Assyria, distinct from A in that Lamaštu is canonically fully developed with female breasts, a lion’s head, and donkey’s ears. Unlike C and D however, she is depicted grasping a comb and spindle (Figs. 3–4 below).¹³

⁷ Wiggermann 2000: 218.

⁸ Wiggermann 2000: 232; Götting 2018: 455–456.

⁹ Ibid., 232. Wiggermann asserts that iconographically, the “canonical Lamaštu was developed on the threshold of the Iron Age in the Middle Assyrian north” (224).

¹⁰ Götting 2018: 186.

¹¹ Wiggermann 2000: 232

¹² Ibid, 220–223.

¹³ Götting (2020) examines these tools or travelling provisions in relation to iconographic and textual evidence. This early basic assembly becomes more elaborate, comprising a collection of items that have utility during travel, offered to Lamaštu during her ritual expulsion to facilitate her journey back to the distant netherworld.

C) Iron Age, Assyrian, related to Neo–Assyrian art and palace reliefs (Fig. 5 below).

D) Iron Age, Babylonian, comparable to Assyrian examples though occasionally divergent, incantations on C and D types are most often from the Hulbazizi series.¹⁴

With this concise outline of the classes, we will move on to Gell’s interpretation of technical systems.

Technology and Magic

In *Technology and Magic* (1988), Gell broadly defines technology as “those forms of social relationships which make it socially necessary to produce, distribute and consume goods and services using ‘technical’ processes”¹⁵ in order to meet established socio–cultural objectives. Gell arranges such technical systems into three classes: 1) the *Technology of Production*, the knowledge and skill needed to obtain essential resources, notably including the production of signals vital to communication; 2) the *Technology of Reproduction*, the domain of kinship, socialization processes and social learning, including all associated strategies and resources directed thereto; 3) *Technology of Enchantment*, the psychological techniques of manipulation of thoughts, emotions, and actions of other beings in order to achieve cooperation and influence others to, in Gell’s words, “perceive social reality in a way favourable to the social interests of the enchanter” or technician, whereupon the “mediation of social life depends.”¹⁶ Gell also frames technology as the “pursuit of difficult–to–obtain objectives by roundabout means” which strategically “exploit the causal properties in a sequence of purposes.”¹⁷

This empirical chain of causal properties is where technology and magic diverge for Gell, with technology aiming to skillfully capitalize on inherent capacities and qualities in the causal chain of phenomena to manifest change, and magic being an adjunct to technical processes, having a “symbolic” or “cognitive” function. We will revisit Gell’s thoughts on magic in alignment with a highly elaborate Iron Age Lamaštu amuletic plaque momentarily.

Lamaštu Amulets as Technology

The earliest texts and amulets that address Lamaštu’s behavior and appearance can be correlated to Gell’s first category of technology, the *Technology of Production*. While

¹⁴ Per Wiggermann (2000: 220), this collection contains incantations against evil in general and not specifically against Lamaštu.

¹⁵ Gell 1988: 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

Lamaštu's iconography is in flux for quite some time, overall signifiers form associations with entirely negative characteristics. Through literate and thus skillful means, adverse natural phenomena such as fever, miscarriage, death during pregnancy or childbirth, and infant mortality are personified as an anthropomorphic monstrous female hybrid. Descriptively and iconographically either grafted onto or appearing in the nearby field are an assortment of creatures deemed threatening in the cultural context due to their being either dangerous or impure (dogs, birds of prey, lions, snakes, pigs, scorpions, centipedes etc.). As a personification of such serious misfortune, Lamaštu is signified as analogous to a composite of dangerous and impure animals and poisonous insects and other characteristics of uncleanness or disease indicated by her loose, unkempt hair, nakedness, and spotted skin.



Fig. 1—Dark greyish-green chlorite Lamaštu amulet (front) from the Late Babylonian period, excavated at Ur. 4.3 x 3.4 cm. British Museum 122999. Indicates Wiggermann's Group A class.



Fig. 1a—Dark greyish-green chlorite Lamaštu amulet (back) showing two lines of inscription and dog. British Museum 122999. Indicates Wiggermann's Group A class.

This technical system communicates through the production of both textual and material signals pertaining to Lamaštu. We may designate the primary agent—artists from Gell's agency theory 'Art Nexus' as the *ašipu* (priest), the *asu* (healer) and the *baru* (diviner), as well as the author—scribes of the incantations series and the artisans producing the amulets.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gell 1998; see also Götting 2018: 460–461.



Fig. 2—Calcedony Lamaštu amulet (front) from c. second millennium BCE. 6.5 x 4.8 cm. Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (HMANE) no. SM 1949.03.002. Accession no. 08985. Indicates Wiggermann's Group A class.



Fig. 2a—Calcedony Lamaštu amulet (back) from c. second millennium BCE. 6.5 x 4.8 cm. Showing five lines of inscription. Indicates Wiggermann's Group A class.

The *Technology of Reproduction* also aligns with Lamaštu's ritual incantations and their correlative amulets. While their primary purposes are apotropaic and exorcistic, the afflicted—recipient of the operation is almost always related to the reproductive process—a woman carrying a pregnancy or perhaps attempting to conceive, or a newborn infant. Consequently, socialization and learning pertaining to Lamaštu are highly prevalent and formative. The nature of a limited, if common, spectrum of illness and fatality is projected and personified in the form of a terrifying (and not surprisingly female) demon and correlative display and adornment objects are situated onto and around infants from birth, and possibly again years later when young women are attempting to or actively conceiving.¹⁹

As well, it is telling that Lamaštu, a horrifying demoness attributed with committing gruesome and traumatizing behaviors, possesses divine pedigree and may or may not be

¹⁹ Götting (2020: 185, citing Schuster–Brandis 2004: 68) affirms that the amulets were strung on wool twine and tied around head, neck, waist/lap, hands and feet of the afflicted or hung above or placed at doors and windows of a household to repel demons.

wholly sanctioned in her office by the gods themselves to perform these destructive actions.²⁰ The ruinous deeds attributed to Lamaštu exemplify divine order and such ideological principles contribute to the construction of a shared socio-religious worldview. Correspondingly, the role and status of ritual scholar-performers, in possession of ample technical knowledge, skills, and tools, are also a component of a broader religio-medical and political paradigm that is culturally constructed, requiring some degree of apprehension achieved through social learning.



Fig. 3—Stone Lamaštu amulet (front) from c. early first millennium BCE. Size unknown. Pergamonmuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Inv. no.: VA Ass 00991 ISIL no.: DE-MUS-815718. Indicates Wiggermann's Group B class. Photo © Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



Fig. 4—Polished black stone Lamaštu amulet (front) from Neo-Assyrian Period (883–612 BCE). 3.9 x 3.0 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Acc. no.: 1985.103. Indicates Wiggermann's Group B class.

In the *Technology of Enchantment*, whereby psychological techniques are employed to influence thoughts, actions, and behaviors, we can identify an agent straightaway who is, quite literally, an “enchanter”—the *ašipu*—priests conducting the rites. By extension, those ritual specialists or scribes committing the incantations to writing as well as the artisans constructing the amulets can also be placed in this class of technician as in the above. The

²⁰ See Wiggermann 2000: 224–225 for differing viewpoints.

technical proficiencies, reputation, or status, as well as the gravity of potential misfortune ongoingly contribute to the religio–medical paradigm enculturated through social learning as iterated moments ago. The power dynamic between ritualists and potentially desperate and fearful clients likely required no heroic feat of manipulation, considering as well that the rituals and associated amulets had been in use and elaborated upon generation after generation for a millennium. In considering the abundant anthropological work done regarding spirit possession across cultures, it is interesting to consider in what ways the stricken consumer–patients of the amulets and rituals may have also been using technologies of enchantment on family members and others, especially since many ritual services, amulets, and later plaques would have only been available to those with sufficient means for access.²¹

Another crucial concept pertains to the ancient Assyrio–Babylonian concept of *šalmu*, a complex Akkadian term adeptly elaborated on by Bahrani (2003) who distinguishes it as a “form of image that circulates within the real.”²² In her explication, it refers to a form of natural representation that has the inherent potential to become an autonomous entity in the real world as opposed to a mere reproduction.²³ As such, *šalmu* indicates something significantly greater than typical notions of representation, it is a form of image that has ontological equivalence to an original beyond the limitations of signification, relating to identity in vastly more profound ways than mere imitation or resemblance. Bahrani substantiates, for reasons that are beyond the scope of our discussion and pertain to the pictographic origin of cuneiform script, that *šalmu* was deeply embedded in ancient Mesopotamian ontology.²⁴

In applying the concept of *šalmu* to the imagery of Lamaštu—thus endowing her with the status of an ontologically real being—the demoness can be considered to have fulfilled the function of ‘enchantress’ entirely on her own. Considering her iconographical depictions in amulets and texts, and their centuries–long innovations as evidence of her function as a technician of the enchanted, it is apparent that she has exerted *immense* agency.

The manifestation of Lamaštu was incremental, beginning with descriptions provided in oral incantations, eventually transcribed in cuneiform script, and collected into series of texts. Correspondingly, depictions were inscribed onto amulet–objects, which display both

²¹ Wiggermann (2020: 248–249) briefly introduced canonization processes of text and image as potential indicators of the shift from folk to scholar domain.

²² Bahrani 2003: 128.

²³ Ibid., 123–134. See also Pongratz–Leisten and Sonik 2015: 12; and Götting 2018: 459.

²⁴ Ibid., 100–120.

script and icon. As a *šalmu* possessing agency, her proliferation and elaboration is both within and driven by the scope of her considerable influence. She is an agentive–prototype (and potentially, if all goes well for the afflicted, also a patient–recipient) emanating as a series of evolving forms within the indices of incantation texts, performed rituals, and apotropaic amulets.

Given her purported proclivities and the harm they potentially impart as well as the duration and complexity of cognitive and material responses, Lamaštu clearly has the agency to consistently psychologically manipulate her victim–patients, ritual specialists, and artisans at a societal level for centuries on end.

Lamaštu Amulets as Magic

An aspect of what makes Lamaštu as unique as notorious is her divine ancestry. She is among the daughter’s of Anu, who is the god of heaven, making her a sister of Inanna/Ishtar whereby she obtains divine status, often referred to in incantations. This is exceptional for demons and contributes to Lamaštu being exclusive among the gods. It was however her predisposition to insubordination and maliciousness that causes Anu to irrevocably banish her from heaven, whereby she requests human infant flesh, solidifying her “lowered” goddess status as evil demoness intent on harm.²⁵

The exorcism ritual, and by extension its visual representation as material amulet–object, was ongoingly elaborated upon such that in some cases it eventually extends in scale so that it becomes unwieldy to wear and must be instead displayed bedside, or near doors or windows in homes (see Fig 5 and 5a below). Now as a placard, the images depicting the ritual sequence are structured in descending registers—similar to the concise amulet incantations which already echo cuneiform tablets—and “read” top to bottom, portraying the ritual procedure pictorially.

In brief, the ritual itself had become increasingly sophisticated, potentially taking place over several days, and was structured to summon and petition assistance from the highest divine personages who accordingly appear on the highest register. Subsequently, seven theriomorphic *urigallū*–demons, high–ranking though subordinate supernatural/semi–divine beings are also conjured and appear in the register below. Next, we see the bed–ridden afflicted and a ritual specialist along with an archetypal fish–*apkallu* who is thought to

²⁵ Wiggermann 2000: 225.

legitimize and support the *ašipu* in urging Lamaštu away. This is depicted on the lowest register and is the best possible outcome—as an exiled lower goddess/demoness, she cannot be dispatched as some common terrestrial threat or nuisance, much less vanquished. Notably, a new personage is introduced; the similarly hybrid ‘king of the Lillu–demons’ known as Pazuzu, standing ominously behind the ritual placard, and also depicted on the lowest register behind Lamaštu, who is shown in a boat departing the ritual scene in the above section and returning to the netherworld. Given his rank, Pazuzu is now also summoned to assist.²⁶



Fig 5—Cast bronze Lamaštu amulet (front) from c. Neo-Assyrian Period (911–604 BCE). Size unknown. Louvre Museum, Department of Oriental Antiquities. Indicates Wiggermann’s Group C class. Photo © 2009 RMN–Grand Palais (Louvre Museum) / Franck Raux

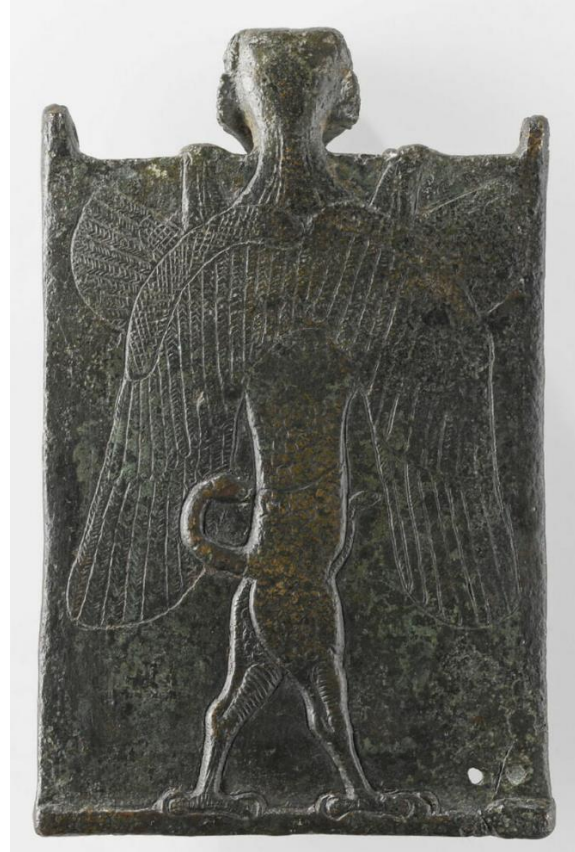


Fig 5a—Cast bronze Lamaštu amulet (back) from c. Neo-Assyrian Period (911–604 BCE). Size unknown. Louvre Museum, Department of Oriental Antiquities. Indicates Wiggermann’s Group C class. Photo © 2009 RMN–Grand Palais (Louvre Museum) / Franck Raux

Gell argues that magic employs the power of the imagination to envision the ultimate criterion for success in the undertaking, wherefrom a symbolic and systematic framework is generated and articulated by the operand. He refers to this articulation as a “continuous

²⁶ The scope of our inquiry prevents discussion of relevant and insightful topics including the psychological mechanisms of magic and the evocation of fear and negative emotions in the Ancient Near East, as well as the implications of the emergence Pazuzu.

stream of commentary” on technical strategies and considers “play” as critical to its emergence. This imaginative and reality-transforming “play-commentary” establishes an ultimate goal and conceptualizes ideal circumstances for a meaningful, apprehensible, and successful undertaking. Subsequent actions and formula are arranged within organizational schemes adjunct to, intersectional with, or overlaid onto, the “real” world of socio-cultural interactivity. These schemes are brought into a coherent system, providing an orientating framework in alignment with practical technical action in social environments.

Within this organizational context, magical formulations define goals, idealize conditions, orient technical action, and provoke elaboration and innovation; such systemization supports signification, internalization, and recall by association.²⁷ Such an associative complex has been shown to have been firmly embedded in the conceptual and iconographic development of *Lamaštu* from the beginning. Her dangerous and impure characteristics continued to accrue throughout her development. Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik (2015) corroborate the critical importance of association for forming memory and facilitating active recollection, explaining that associations are created from previously assigned “pictorial, compositional, and abstract” representations which are automatically cognitively organized into “broader frameworks or schemas.”²⁸ Gell’s definition of magic emphasizes imagination, elaboration, and association during the construction of such organizational symbolic-cognitive frameworks.

Returning now to *šalmu*, beyond the domain of individual entities and linear time and space and extending it to the realm of multi-participatory performative actions, we can observe that during the protracted course of the development of the amulets—becoming progressively more technically complex as they evolve—their *šalmu* ‘presences’ the same level of efficacy as the elaborate ritual performance itself. This efficacy places the amulet-plaque precisely in alignment with Gell’s formulation of magic.

Gell considers magic to be an “ideal technology” distinctly functioning with a cognitive-symbolic field. What he refers to as the “defining feature” in his interpretation of magic, what makes it ‘ideal’ is that it can be practiced with “zero opportunity costs” (1988: 9). This is crucial: While magic is adjunct to technology, it is distinct because the literal toll of physical effort, material investment, and bodily hazard is wholly absent from the process. He concludes by asserting that “production 'by magic' is production minus the

²⁷ Gell 1988.

²⁸ Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015: 5.

disadvantageous side-effects, such as struggle, effort, etc.”²⁹ The ritual amulet evolved not as an image-object meant to mimic or support the exorcistic ritual, but instead to possess the same efficacy of the ritual exorcism itself.³⁰ In the circumstances where such artefacts were utilized via adornment or display as a fully efficacious analogue to the lengthy, sophisticated, and potentially costly ritual, they became unquestionably magical.

Conclusion

The infant-snatching demoness Lamaštu was a serious and persistent concern for ancient Mesopotamians, undergoing elaborations and innovations in text, artefact, and performance for millennia. The apotropaic amulets whereon she is depicted align with the three technical systems categorized and defined by Alfred Gell in *Technology and Magic*. Over the course of centuries, the evolution of ritual performances and amulets eventually culminated in complex material objects that possessed *šalmu*, whereby they manifested ontologically ‘real’ status and *presenced* the same procedural efficacy as the extensive ritual operations they portrayed. Thus, they symbolically became essentially analogous with the technical procedures exhibited without incurring relative cost. By Gell’s definition, such equivalence is precisely what allows the amulet-plaque to be categorized as ‘magic’ proper. Despite these extensive and continuous advancements, Lamaštu’s appetite and influence were never extinguished in ancient times, and perhaps remain evident even today.

²⁹ Gell 1988: 9.

³⁰ Götting 2018 also recognizes Bahrani’s concept of *šalmu* as applicable to the Group C Lamastu plaques. Therein she applies Gell’s agential theory and correlates his Art Nexus matrix to the full array of personages depicted on the five registers thereon.

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