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Sex, Magic and the Liminal Body in the Erotic Art and Texts of the Old Babylonian Period*

In the visual and textual erotica of the Old Babylonian period, sex and the body have magical applications. Although much has been written about the love songs of Inanna and Dumuzi, of bawdy incantations and beery poems, the magical intent that lies at the foundation of Old Babylonian erotic literature, no matter what the genre, has been largely overlooked. Far less studied has been the Old Babylonian visual erotica – the focus of this paper – which appears almost exclusively as terracotta plaque reliefs.¹ The clay images arose from the same cultural awareness as the texts, an awareness that assumed a supernatural potency of the body in sexual arousal. They belong to a group of perhaps thousands of small, mass-produced, mold-made plaques. The Old Babylonian plaque industry manufactured nearly eighty standardized motifs, including the sexual varieties, which circulated throughout Mesopotamia for more than three centuries.² The erotic reliefs were largely composed of three types.³ The first is *coitus a tergo* in

which the woman bends over and the man penetrates her from behind. Usually the position is combined with the woman drinking beer through a tube (Figs. 1-3, p. 29). The second is intercourse or embrace *en face*, sometimes standing (Fig. 4, p. 37), but more often in bed (Figs. 5-7, p. 37). The lovers are locked in a mutual gaze. The third typology is single nude females in postures of sexual display, with or without an outsized, disembodied phallus between their legs (Figs. 10-12, p. 45). Despite the diminutive size of most Old Babylonian plaques, their craftsmanship and sometimes the depth of relief can be astonishing. Considering that plaques featuring sexual imagery were found in the same archaeological contexts as all other plaques, that is, almost exclusively in non-elite residential areas (Assante 2000:108-78), there is no reason to believe that they functioned differently from the way other plaques functioned – to protect the house and to promote the auspicious for its residents.⁴ Because excavators sometimes found them in rooms of high

* This paper is a condensed revision from a chapter of my doctoral thesis, *The Erotic Reliefs of Ancient Mesopotamia* (2000). The thesis includes Middle Assyrian lead erotica.

¹ See also the one provenanced erotic seal from this period from Tell al-Dhiba'i (al-Gailani Werr 1988, fig. 365). The seal was influenced by plaque images, some of which were found at the same site.

² Plaques began to appear in Ur III levels. Production all but ceased around 1700 BCE, although a few northern sites, such as Kish, produced plaques into the early 1600s. The Elamite plaques, most of which are sexual, differ from Mesopotamia's in function, date and content and are not considered here.

³ The 53 provenanced sexual plaques available for study are a small fraction of the original production. Some plaques were simply discarded by early excavators and an untold number await discovery in unexcavated portions of tells. Unprovenanced sexual plaques continue to appear in museums and private collections. Although a majority of sexual plaques falls into three general categories, a few plaques are unique, for example, intercourse on a chair (Kish, FM 156560, see Assante 2000, pl. IX, no. 22) and *a tergo* sex while playing instruments (Larsa, AO 16924, see Barrelet 1968, fig. 591; Assante 2000, pl. VII, no. 40).

⁴ In earlier scholarship Old Babylonian sexual imagery was thought to depict sacred marriage rituals, sacred

traffic, their explicit images were available to female as well as male, child as well as adult (Assante 2000:125). The three categories of plaques seem to draw from three different but interrelated folk traditions that work white magic through metaphor and analogy.

In Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, sexual and non-sexual, there is a complex yet detectable connection between magic and the liminal. Ancient Mesopotamians envisioned liminal zones in general as having great magical potency, for better or for worse. Gates, doorways, windows, crossroads, shrines, beds and even the sexually aroused body, to name some, were the perceived spatial correlates of an invisible membrane through which the worlds of the seen and the unseen, of the magical and the mundane interacted. Since these intersections amplified paranormal activity, they were usually manipulated to ensure activity of a positive nature.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, Old Babylonian plaques were themselves liminal, serving as points where inhabitants of the non-physical universe

could emerge and affect everyday reality (Assante 2002). There is proof that at least some plaques were placed on doorjambs and probably window frames of houses and local chapels to protect entry (Woolley and Mallowan 1976:125), although archaeologists rarely recorded their exact contexts and the evidence is therefore scant. Nevertheless, the majority of characters from the plaque repertoire belongs to the category of guardian spirits who warded off unseen, malevolent forces that habitually invaded the body or the home (Assante 2002). Since plaque figures were to patrol psychic planes, artists must have made them for other supernatural beings to recognize them easily. Recognition of the liminal sometimes depended on the greater cultural contexts of individual plaque figures, such as Humbaba, the lion and the dog, figures commonly associated at that time with guarding entranceways.⁶ More often the liminal is apparent in the imagery itself. For instance, when a viewer beholds the bull-eared god holding a gatepost,⁷ a goddess looming in a doorway,⁸ a shrine shielded by

prostitution or common prostitution. A few scholars suggested that sexual plaques were used to enhance fertility or male sexual potency. I show that these interpretations and the very existence of sexual rituals and fertility rites in ancient Mesopotamia are modern fictions (Assante 2000:10-73 and forthcoming). Similarly, what has been written about Mesopotamian prostitution in the secondary literature is almost wholly fiction based on consistent misinterpretation of primary texts (see Assante 1998).

⁵ Most often manipulation took the form of setting protective agents at the gate or doorway (see following note), although many other techniques were common. Burying figurines under thresholds, for instance, is abundantly attested in archaeological and textual records. Impressing cylinder seals on lumps of clay that covered door locks may also have functioned in part to magically guard liminal zones. Other forms included ritual behavior, the most famous being Ishtar's ritual undressing at the gates of the Netherworld.

⁶ Humbaba/Huwawa was guardian of the Cedar Forest. Significantly, Gilgamesh hung his severed head on the doors of Enlil's temple at Nippur. The monstrous head, one of which was affixed to the temple façade at Tell al-Rimah (Oates 1967), functioned apotropaically much like the later Gorgon's head. Terracotta lions were found

at the doorways of the Nisaba and Haya temples at Tell Harmal (Baqir 1946:23f, fig. 5; F. Basmachi, *Treasures of the Iraq Museum* [Baghdad, 1975-76], no. 107; and Frankfort 1988:144, fig. 126). Later periods continued using lions and lion-bull hybrids in conjunction with the protection of walls and entranceways, such as Babylon's Procession Way and Assyria's famous palace *lamassu*'s. The guard dog seems to be universally known. However, dog plaques from Isin might belong to Isin's goddess of healing, in which case they probably kept off forces that brought illness.

⁷ Wiggermann (1981-82:103f) identifies the popular bull-eared god as the *kusarikku*. The *kusarikku* is known from an Old Babylonian lullaby as a guard who dwells in the house along with the household god (Farber 1989:34f, van der Toorn 1999:139-47), meaning certainly that their images were kept in the house. For an example of the bull-man holding a gatepost see McCown and Haines 1967, pl. 136, fig. 9.

⁸ This is probably the minor goddess Ninshubura. One of her chief charges was monitoring the human and spiritual flow at entranceways, which is no doubt why her sanctuary in Ishtar's Kititum Temple at Ishchali was located immediately behind the compound's gate (Jacobsen 1989:89 n. 40). The female Ninshubura was Ishtar's



Figs. 1-2 *Coitus a tergo* drinking scenes. Babylon left (VA Bab 3576, 13.5 × 7.5 cm). Warka right (VA Bab 3576, 7.2 × 6.1 cm). [Photo author. Courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin]

weapons and flanked by gateposts topped with Humbaba heads,⁹ or a couple in coitus *a tergo* under a Humbaba head,¹⁰ he or she is looking at a visual description of protected liminal space.¹¹ It is within this space that beneficent elements are encouraged to enter and evil is repelled.

At the most fundamental level Old Babylonian visual erotica inserts the liminal by structuring scenes around sexual anatomy. The general term for body orifice, KÁ in Sumerian or *bābu* in Akkadian, is expressly liminal because it also means door or gate. The vaginal opening, *bāb ūri* and the anus *bāb šuburri* are imagined then as thresholds. From literary and incantation texts we know that the body and its orifices were regarded as sites of transition, especially when aroused. In the Old Babylonian peri-



Fig. 3 *Coitus a tergo* drinking scene. Khafajeh (Iraq Museum, 11.4 × 10.4 cm). [Photo courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago]

⁹ Two plaques from Kish, probably duplicates, show this scene. See Assante 2000, pl. VII, no. 15 for Ox. 1924.260 and for FM 156836 see Moorey 1975, pl. XXVa; Assante 2000, pl. VII, no. 27.

¹⁰ Other popular motifs are less obvious, the most prominent being the nude female, ubiquitous in Mesopotamia, but also the splay-bearded male holding a mace and the

servant or *sukkal* in Old Babylonian tradition. E. Auerbach (1994:325) found a strong correlation between this plaque motif and lion motifs in the domestic quarters of the temple, suggesting that Ishtar's servant and Ishtar's lion had similar functions. For an example see Opificius 1961, pl. 2, fig. 167.

⁹ For an example see Opificius 1961, pl. 5, fig. 283.

od, it is usually Inanna's excited thresholds that work to effect white magic, as we shall see, whereas in the first-millennium BCE *Gilgamesh Epic* Ishtar and her vulva bring only death or castration. Here the goddess is accused of being a lax portal or permeable barrier that admits elements hazardous to civilization; she is, for instance, "a flimsy door which does not keep out the wind nor blast."¹²

The two motifs that make up the bulk of intercourse scenes, *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes and bed scenes, articulate the liminal more clearly than other types.¹³ For one thing, their respective iconography efficiently establishes their liminal, and hence magical, settings: the local tavern or domestic bed. Both are easily recognized, ordinary locales of daily life, yet, as the textual material offered below will show, both are territories permeated with supernatural potency. These two scenes also reference a wider magical context by encapsulating Inanna's erotic adventures. Contemporary

literary erotica features two versions of Inanna as the protagonist. In one, she is the *kar.kid/harimtu*, or single woman, off in search of sex at the tavern – ostensibly, at least.¹⁴ In the other, Inanna is the "bride to be" on the verge of bedding Dumuzi. Like the mundane locales, these aspects of Inanna reflect quotidian life of the non-elite, the same group for which the plaques were made. Specifically, they correspond to the two life routes typically available to non-elite Mesopotamian women. By contrast, her other, more official aspects, such as the exalted Queen of Heaven and the warrior goddess, would not have presented models with which the non-elite could identify. It cannot be mere coincidence that the two leading motifs in visual erotica so closely match the two *topoi* in literary erotica of the same period. Under comparative study, the match becomes more apparent, and how both art and text function magically comes to light.

The Drinking Scenes

A thoughtful look at the iconographical content of *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes (Figs. 1-3) reveals the object's magical intent. The local tavern as the scene's setting,

suppliant goddess, among others. Wiggermann (1985-86) convincingly argues that the nude female is *bāštu*, the bearded male with mace is the *udug/sēdu* spirit (also in Wiggermann 1992:164ff), and the suppliant goddess is the *lamma/lamassu*, all demons associated with regulating traffic at entranceways.

¹² The lines continue: "Waterskin which [leaks on] its bearer. Limestone which [undermines] a stone wall. Battering ram which [destroys the wall(?) against(?)] an enemy land (ll. 38-40)" (Foster 1987:34f, Nineveh VI ll. 34-40). And see the later passage where the poet conceives of Ishtar's liminal nature – and thus her command of the liminal – as so destructive it can annihilate all life. Ishtar threatens to demolish the barriers between the living and the dead by tearing down the gates of the Netherworld, smashing the door posts, leaving the doors

Inanna, the divine tavern *harimtu*, as the central figure, beer drinking and sex as the principal actions, all played significant roles in contemporary folk magic. The

flat, so that the dead will go up to eat the living and outnumber them (GE VI iii 90-96).

¹³ At present, there are 43 known provenienced intercourse scenes: 18 *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes and 11 bed scenes. Almost all unprovenienced intercourse scenes of which I am aware are either drinking scenes or bed scenes.

¹⁴ Hereafter *harimtu*. For a comprehensive discussion about the *harimtu* as a legal class rather than a prostitute see Assante 1998. The *harimtu* was a woman not living in a patriarchal household, that is, she neither lived with her father nor was married; this definition approximates today's single women. Since the mortal *harimtu*'s sexual life was not restrained by law, husband or father, she, like her divine counterpart, became the emblem of sexual freedom in some poetry.

drinking scenes are the oldest of the sexual motifs, appearing in Nippur levels as early as late Ur III. They were also the longest lasting and the most widespread of the sexual varieties.¹⁵ More importantly, they are the most standardized, changing little over time and place. Their emphatic iconographical replication, extending even to the sexual position taken by the two partners, makes clear that the source of the scene was mythology or folklore.¹⁶ They portray a man and woman in intercourse. The woman bends over to suck beer through a drinking tube from a vessel placed on the floor. As she drinks, the man penetrates her from behind. The postures, like the style, are quite realistic. In most, the woman locks her legs to withstand her partner's thrusts. In some she is nearly upright (e.g. Fig. 1); in others (e.g. Fig. 2) she is nearly parallel with the ground, depending on the height of the drinking tube. The man, compositionally a figure of lesser importance, stands erect at the side, usually holding the woman steady by her hips. If the drinking motif depicted everyday life, as has often been claimed, it would exhibit far more postural and iconographical variation.

The magico-liminal nature of the tavern and beer, which I read in the plaques, is

repeatedly confirmed in cuneiform literature, laws, incantations and medical texts. The Old Babylonian local tavern, the *ēš-dam* or *bīt sabīm/sabītim*, was usually run by a women, the *sabītum*. Unlike the *bīt aštammi* or inn, the *bīt sabīm/sabītim* did not offer lodging and hence had no beds.¹⁷ From this period and into the first millennium BCE, the tavern or alehouse was Inanna/Ishtar's special province and one that she personally safeguarded (Assante 1998:69 and 73-82). It may be that images of "her home," as the tavern was sometimes called, automatically enlisted that aspect of Inanna which specifically protected the local pub. The tavern and its paraphernalia played significant roles in the Mesopotamian rituals of most periods and places. Its thresholds and fermenting vats were used in incantation rites, while its condiments provided the community with pharmaceuticals.¹⁸ Locals exploited its special properties and its convivial atmosphere to avert foretold dangers (Maul 1992). As with all liminal zones, neglecting to properly harness the tavern's potency could lead to impurities, if not outright harm.¹⁹ The magical agency of beer is even more pronounced. Beer is abundantly attested as a leading ritual libation to the gods and often figured

¹⁵ Of the 53 documented provenienced sexual plaques, 18 are *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes. Such plaques occurred in most major sites of Mesopotamia, including the Diyala. Some broken *coitus a tergo* plaques probably belong to the drinking scene type. See Assante 2000:108-78 for archaeological contexts. Despite Elam's great numbers of erotic plaques, tavern scenes were not among them, indicating that the folk tradition from which this scene derived was either not known or of little meaning in Elam.

¹⁶ For exploration of the folk sources of Old Babylonian terracotta plaque motifs in general as well as the magical significance of replication see Assante 2002.

¹⁷ In modern scholarship the *bīt sabīm/sabītim* is facilely translated as "brothel" or "bordello," and the *sabītu* as "brothel madam" and the like, translations that I have rigorously refuted in Assante 1998:65-82. It is possible that sex or, at least, lovers' trysts did occur occasionally at the local tavern rather than in the stricter moral envi-

ronment of the typical patriarchal house. However, caution is necessary here because from laws and literature copulation seems to have taken place nearly everywhere outside the home: the main thoroughfare, the city square, the city wall, the granary, the sheep hut, the storehouse, the canebrake and the garden. Taverns should no more be equated with brothels than modern-day parking lots should be.

¹⁸ For the ritual use of tavern thresholds, stands and vats see Caplice 1974, Farber 1986:248, Maul 1992, Assante 1998:68. The tavern oven was even used to bake magical clay figurines.

¹⁹ Picking up impurities from the thresholds of taverns is no doubt why Hammurabi's law § 110 forbids *naditu*'s and *ugbabtu*'s from entering them, even though some *naditu*'s owned taverns. For discussion see Maul 1992 and Assante 1998:67f. Maul postulates that it was Ishtar who was called upon to purify taverns.

in powerful social transitions in myths (Michałowski 1994). Furthermore it was a fundamental ingredient in magico-medical remedies. Taken together, it becomes clear that the most prominent sexual plaque motif, the *coitus a tergo* drinking scene, describes a supernaturally charged neighborhood space.

Turning to the central figure in drinking scenes, Inanna/Ishtar as the tavern *harimtu* likewise belongs to the magico-liminal realms. Obviously, as a deity she is necessarily supernatural. The divine tavern *harimtu* seems to have been an enduring figure in folk magic. She appears only intermittently in texts. Of the three occurrences, one is a first-millennium BCE bilingual text,²⁰ another, "Hymn to Inanna/Ishtar," is a problematic bilingual work in extremely poor condition and of uncertain date²¹ and the third is a proper Sumerian hymn, "Hymn to Inanna-Ninegalla," from the period of our plaques.²² It is in the last where the tavern is called her home. The two bilingual texts in which Akkadian scribes attempt to translate from Sumerian – not always with great success – suggest to me that the *topos* of Inanna as the tavern *harimtu* was originally a Sumerian phenomenon. The survival of this *topos* well into the first millennium BCE as well as its absence in written literature in the interim further suggest that this sexy protagonist was kept alive in oral tradition from generation to generation, a tradition that began at the latest in the Old Babylonian period.²³ Although the texts are obscure, the divine *harimtu*'s liminal nature

comes through via a number of devices. In the Old Babylonian hymn to Inanna-Ninegalla the temporal setting sets a particular tone of transition, of dusk when the two clear divides of day and night blur. The moment is cast by the rise of the evening star, Inanna's celestial body. As the star rises, so does Inanna the *harimtu*. The heavenly and the earthly aspects of the goddess are synchronized and initiate liminal time. The shape-shifting nature of the goddess is hardly this subtle in the other two texts. In the bilingual hymn to Inanna/Ishtar, the divine tavern *harimtu* also identifies herself as the evening star, the goddess of war, of thunderstorms and rains, among other things. The text specifically mentions that Inanna sits at the *door* of the alehouse to work her magic, signaling a liminal zone. We must then read the divine *harimtu* within in the context the poem establishes for her, as a powerful force of change or even interruption that throws shadow and mystery on the everyday.²⁴ In fact, this and the previous text conclude with allusions to the paranymp (nimigir-si/susapinnu), the male gift-bearing attendant of brides and grooms (Greengus 1966:68f, Malul 1989). The inclusion of the paranymp heralds transition and increase. In the text from the first millennium, the goddess is somehow both male and female once inside the tavern: "When I sit in the beerhouse, Though I am a woman, I am also a noble young man." Clearly these three texts are not describing an ordinary *harimtu* but rather an elemental power or more probably an atmosphere in which cer-

²⁰ SBH:56 37-40, Falkenstein 1964:119 n. 38, Röllig 1970:66, Assante 1998:73f.

²¹ SBH:155, Malul 1989:249, Assante 1998:74f.

²² BE 21 no. 12, 10-20 + dupl. 3N-T339 iii + SEM no. 87 obv. 2 to rev. 4. Interpretations vary. See Jacobsen 1976: 140, Alster 1974:83f, Assante 1998:75ff.

²³ Ishtar as a libidinous tavern-going woman appears in a first-millennium BCE *namburbi* ritual, although here the goddess is not referred to as a *harimtu*. This text or parts of it have been translated by Zimmern 1918-19,

Ebeling 1955, Caplice 1974:23f, Farber 1986:91:227-81 and Foster 1993:898. All contain serious misinterpretations. For a more accurate translation and discussion see Assante 1998:77-82.

²⁴ The mortal *harimtu* was also involved with threshold magic, possibly because of her marginal social status. In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, sex with a *harimtu* transforms Enkidu from beast to man. In *namburbi* rites, dust from the *harimtu*'s door was mixed with beer to make magical potions.

tainty is erased and anything is possible.

What is clear is that the *harimtu*'s presence at the tavern spreads enchantment. Within the logic of this particular *topos* the atmosphere takes on sexual colorations. The colorations are, however, secondary for we learn from a *namburbi* rite that this kind of ambiance was called forth to effect magical gains of a non-sexual nature, namely to promote the supplicant's business.²⁵ Similarly, the notion of seizure in the two hymns, which is more typical to incantations than to literary works, is rendered in sexual terms. The divine tavern *harimtu* becomes the embodiment of pure desire, who *seizes* (dab₃) men in one hymn,²⁶ yet in another is a net that catches both men and women.²⁷ The citation of incantation terminology seems to signal a course of action that, like the atmosphere described above, is primarily magical rather than sexual in

makeup.

This is not to say that the idealized tavern environment of sexual arousal and the heady glow from drinking are empty poetic trappings. Myths, incantations and literary texts describe arousal and inebriation, frequently in tandem, as magical in themselves. The experience of one or the other is ultimately of change, in which body and mind pass beyond the thresholds of the norm. These, the oldest of human pleasures, expanded the heart, suspended reality and gave room for magic to take place in a way not dissimilar from spiritual or religious experiences. In one Old Babylonian incantation, sex and drinking are combined again with the incantation terminology of seizure.²⁸ Significantly, the chief tools of magic making in this text are the female's aroused body orifices. A woman recites the spell in order to bend her straying lover to her will:

- 9 With the slaver of the dog, thirst(?), hunger(?),²⁹
- 10 With the slap of the face, with the rolling of the eyes,
- 11 I have hit you on the head, I have deranged your reason,
- 12 Set your will to my will,
- 13 Set your decision to my decision,
- 14 I hold you fast as Ishtar held Dumuzi,
- 15 (As) beer (lit. Zeraš) binds her drinker,
- 16 I have bound you with my hairy mouth,
- 17 With my vagina (full of) wetness (lit. urine),
- 18 With my mouth (full of) saliva.
- 19 With my vagina (full of) wetness.
- 20 No female rival shall go near you!

What is important here is that the incantation employs Ishtar's seizure of her lover and beer's seizure of the drinker as similes

for the state of being spellbound. The verb "to bind" in line 15 is *kasū*, that is to cast and hold someone in a paralyzing spell.

²⁵ See note 23. Although the *namburbi* incantation employs the ancient configuration of Ishtar, sex and the tavern, its ultimate purpose, to secure "brisk trade," applies to a number of professions, not just tavern keeping. The performer of the rite can be male or female.

²⁶ Inanna-Ninegalla hymn: ¹¹⁸ēš.dam-ta lú mu-dab₃-me-en, "From the tavern you seize men." See note 22.

²⁷ "Hymn to Inanna/Ishtar": ⁵⁶[sa]-atür_u-ra [] ⁵⁷še-tú ša/e²-ra-a-at² [] x []. "[I am] a net (destined for??) the young ones(??)." See note 21.

²⁸ This 120-line text dates to the reign of Ishme-Dagan

(1974-1954 BCE), edited by C. Wilcke in "Liebesbeschwörungen aus Isin," ZA 75 (1985), 198f. The tablet contains Sumerian and Akkadian love incantations composed for female clients. It was deliberately broken, then buried in a jar by the city wall (a liminal zone). Foster (1993:141-45) retranslated this Akkadian portion.

²⁹ The dog's saliva is called "semen" in some incantations against rabid dog bites. "It carries its semen in its mouth, Where it bit, it left its offspring" (Foster 1993: 124 II.22. [a] and [b]). The swollen stomachs of rabies victims probably led to the notion of impregnation.

Ishtar, beer, vagina and mouth all have the power to bind.³⁰ Here, as elsewhere, the vagina and mouth are interchangeable. The magical body of the divine *harimtu* binds at both ends. Beer sometimes contained a plant additive called *kasū* (Sumerian *gazi*), which here plays on the verb to bind; *kasū* was probably used as an aphrodisiac.³¹ In *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes binding is intrinsic to the general theme of sex and drinking. More specifically, seizure is visually translated in actions such as the female's vaginal (or anal) and often manual grasp of her partner's penis, as well as her firm mouth and hand holds on the drinking tube. Texts or pictures that combine all

these notations of binding and seizure must have been regarded as extremely potent tools of magic.

The association between drinking and sex was deeply rooted in the Mesopotamian psyche of the Old Babylonian period, a factor that must have contributed to the popularity of drinking scene plaques. For example, beer was firmly equated to saliva and vaginal wetness, the chief features of the excited female body. Mesopotamian beer was normally sweetened with date syrup, called "honey" in modern translations. In most literary erotica the mouth and vulva are honey-sweet, as they are in this Sumerian court poem from Ur:³²

- 19 My god, the tavern keeper, her beer is sweet!
- 20 And her vulva is sweet like her beer – and her beer is sweet!
- 21 And her vulva is sweet like all her mouths – and her beer is sweet!³³
- 22 Her kašbir-beer and her (regular) beer are sweet.

In this hymn, the poet adds the anus to the list of transposable body portals, although it is merely alluded to as inferior kašbir beer.³⁴ Since the imagery of the beery-sweet mouth/vulva consistently occurs in Old Babylonian literary erotica, we can be fairly

certain that it reflects a shared cultural perception of the aroused and intoxicating female body, a perception that viewers brought to drinking scene plaques.

The close connection between female sexuality and beer even extended to the

³⁰ CAD K:253. The binding vulva appears in other incantations as well, for example: "My vagina is the vagina of a bitch! His penis is the penis of a dog! As the vagina of a bitch holds fast the penis of a dog, (so may my vagina hold fast his penis)" (Biggs 1967:33).

³¹ CAD K:248-50. The connection between *kasū* and magical terminology is clear from a first-millennium text against sorcery: *kīma û kasī li-ik-su-ši kišpuša* "may her (own) spells bind (*kasū*) her like (this) *kasū* plant" (Maqlu V 34 quoted in CAD K:252).

³² This famous excerpt comes from the court of Shu-Sin. The text was first treated by Falkenstein in WO 1 (1947) and SAHG (1953), 119-20, 370; then Kramer in ZA 52 (1957), 84 and Kramer 1969:93-95; Jacobsen in JCS 7 (1953), 46-47 and Jacobsen 1987:95f; and Sollberger in JCS 30 (1978), 99f; retransliterated and translated by Alster (1985:138-42) and by Sefati (1998:344-46).

³³ ³⁴ *ka-ka-a-ni-gim gal,-la-ni zé-ba-àm kaš-a-ni zé-ba-àm*. Alster (1985:142) ignores the reduplication of KA in his translation and renders line 21 as "Like her mouth her vulva is sweet, her beer is sweet." Jacobsen (1987:96) takes the alternative transliteration *du₁₁-du₁₁-a-ni* (KA = *du₁₁*) to mean "her chatter." "And her private parts are

sweet like her chatter...." All these nuances are implicit in the line.

³⁴ ²² *kašbir-a-ni kaš-a-ni zé-ba-àm*. Alster (1985:142) translates the signs for this type of beer as "small beer" while Jacobsen (1987:96.) translates "bittersweet beer." Little is known about this type of beer during the time of Shu-Sin. Later lexical texts relate kašbir to *hiqu* (Hartman and Oppenheim 1950:24 II 37'), which may be filtered, or lighter or diluted in quality. The only near contemporary source for kašbir occurs in a Sumerian text where a farmer lists his beers in descending order of quality: *kaš.sag.ga* (prime beer), *kaš.sig*, (good beer), *kaš.sá.ge.a* (prepared beer) and finally, *kašbir*, which is probably a beer diluted with water (Stol 1994:162, Sefati 1998:346 l. 22). It seems to me that the poetic device of listing two types of beer, one inferior and one regular, was not random but alludes to two different female orifices. It is reasonable to read regular beer in conjunction with the vagina, the most common sexual orifice, and inferior beer in conjunction with the anus, since other literary equations of vaginal secretion with sweet beer never allude to a beer of inferior quality.

components used in brewing. The known similes suggest an additional underlying rationale, the mysteries of transformation – just as the man's semen, “a” in Sumerian, which also means water, mixes in the woman's body to produce a child, so water and barley when mixed convert into beer. It is no surprise then that barley, from which beer was made, was, along with the beer wort, a metaphor for the vulva in some love songs.³⁵ The provocative image of the gakkul (*kakkullu*), a specific type of fermenting vat (*namzitu*) that dripped beer from one end, stands in for the womb in some literature.³⁶ The gakkul simile evokes first and foremost the liquid emissions of female genitalia. Here, as in most imagery, the notion of pregnancy is merely latent. Although brewing items are not portrayed in the highly abbreviated tavern scenes, with one possible exception from Tell Asmar, the similes that relate them to the female body further illustrate the rich cultural contexture of the drinking scene motif.³⁷

The motif also offers a number of bawdy visual puns that amplified the image's magical effectiveness while adding to the delight of viewers, including the goddess of sex herself. The straw held in the mouth is undoubtedly a pun for fellatio – the most ancient art of “kissing the phallus,” one of the me’s Inanna stole from Enki after a drinking bout, no less, and brought to humankind. The pun, which recalls the hairy

mouth cited from the Isin text above, is most obvious in a plaque from Kish in which the drinking vessel is broken off.³⁸ The woman grabs the beer straw in one hand, while in the other she grabs the penis as it penetrates her; tellingly, both straw and penis have the same inflated dimensions. In an unusual Khafajeh relief (Fig. 3), the man joins his partner in drinking, not from a straw but from a cup, although men frequently drink from straws in other visual genres.³⁹ Most likely, the artist wished to avoid implicating the man in fellation. Another pun arises as a result – since the rim of a cup or any vessel can be rendered *šaptu*, “lip,” whose meaning includes vaginal lips, one may well read cunnilingus into the man’s oral activity.

Drinking scenes, like the literature of the divine tavern *harimtu*, focus attention on the female. By contrast, the male in reliefs is often compressed to the side, a mirror of the drinking tube. In related texts, he is usually anonymous. The erect body of the male plaque figure, which in some reliefs is so exaggerated that he nearly bends backwards, seems to visually stand for the erect male member. The term used for making the penis tumescent in potency incantations is *tebû*, “to rise up,” from which “erection,” *tebûtu*, derives (Biggs 1967:9). The same verb can also mean to “stand erect,” as applied to the human body in general. Such scenes are even more complex when we

³⁵ See Sefati 1998:129 ll. 7-8 and Jacobsen 1987:97f. The song from which the beer wort image comes is not necessarily a part of the Inanna-Dumuzi cycle.

³⁶ The ordinary gakkul was a big-bellied terracotta vat with a single small hole. Brewers squeezed (*mazû*) liquids from the barley malt into the vat, and after fermentation, the hole at the bottom was opened to let the beer drip out into the collector vat underneath. See Stol 1994:170, Landsberger and Balkan 1950:120 and Hartman and Oppenheim 1950:16. In a passage from later witchcraft literature, the fermenting vat image is used negatively as a curse: “may (her) womb drip beer like a fermenting vat” (Geller 1989:199 l. 36). The gakkul lettuce, *hi-is-gakkul,(U'.DIM)^{SAR}*, probably a kind of en-

dive-shaped lettuce that emits a milky sap (Leick 1994: 123), was a metaphorical image for the vulva in Inanna’s bridal songs and serves as a link between the tavern and the bed. It might also have been an aphrodisiac. The love song from which this example comes has been translated by Kramer (1963:508), Jacobsen (1987:93) and Sefati (1998:361).

³⁷ See Assante 2000, pl. VI, no. 42. The scene features a man and a woman in *coitus a tergo*. The woman seems to be preparing beer bread.

³⁸ See Moorey 1975, pl. XXVc; Assante 2000, pl. II, no. 25.

³⁹ An upper fragment of an Ishchali plaque may well be a duplicate. See Assante 2000, pl. II, No. 8.

realize that the male's pubic area is occasionally compared to a mouth. So the ancient Mesopotamian might have imagined his penis as a probing tongue or even a drinking tube plunged into her beery orifice. To further convolute sexual imagery, in certain love songs, the man's beard is a shining gakkul (vat) mane of lapis lazuli, the stone that poetically describes lustrous hair.⁴⁰ Thus, following the word play, obviously a favorite device of Sumerian erotic poetry, allows a peek at ancient associations made between the beard (or pubic hair) and mouth of the male and the hair and orifice of female genitalia, a connection made more overtly in later literature.⁴¹ The beard that usually appears on men in erotic plaques is not then just a sign of male virility; it also alludes to primary sexual anatomy, as does the erect masculine posture.

The working puns deepen erotic tone and invest the objects with the power of that

sexy charismatic aura called *hi.li* or *kuzbu*. The divine embodiment of this palpable power was, of course, Inanna/Ishtar, the *bēlet kuzbim par excellence*.⁴² The *kuzbu*-laden images of spellbinding tavern sex and the sheer physical pleasures displayed seem specifically designed to attract and titillate the *harimtu* aspect of Inanna. If she is aroused by the image, she is in some sense also captured by it. In addition, the visual citation of her tavern adventures would flatter her and, more importantly, activate the latent power of the mythic moment. At the simplest level, offering deities things that please their senses, such as hymns, special foods, incense or certain images, along with usually profuse flattery, is copiously documented in cuneiform literature; such gestures were made to enlist a god's favor and protection. Plaques being inherently magical are more complex. Once they secure divine favor, their magical value presumably has no limits.⁴³

The Bed Scenes

The most popular of the erotic typologies after the drinking scenes are bed scenes (Figs. 5-7).⁴⁴ The bed, like the tavern, is liminal territory and intimately related to the female body. Bed scenes, like tavern scenes, seem to draw on a general awareness of Inanna's legendary sexual affairs. Although the divine *harimtu* copulates with various, usually anonymous, partners at the tavern, Inanna as the bride-to-be has only one, the beloved Dumuzi. The miraculous

attributes of this paradigmatic couple, which I maintain gave such agency to their plaque images, endured throughout Mesopotamia's history. It is through bed plaques where we can see most clearly how sex works as an analogy for the procedure of attraction and seizure characteristic of magical activity, a topic to be discussed in the following section.

The bed scene motif seems to present sexual union between Inanna and Dumuzi

⁴⁰ A woman (probably Inanna) calls her lover: *su_o-za-gin-mu suhur gakkul-mu / su_o-aga(?) za-gin-gim dar-a-mu*. "My lapis lazuli beard, my gakkul-mané / My shining beard like a lapis lazuli ..." Transliteration from Alster 1985:129, text CBS 4569 iii 42-43. Also Sefati 1998:268.

⁴¹ For the Assyrian reference see Livingstone 1989:66.

⁴² "Lady of *kuzbu*" was one of her epithets. Leick 1994: 181.

⁴³ How Old Babylonian plaques in general attract, and even capture, divine beings and what role folk stories and myths play in the process are explored in Assante 2002.

⁴⁴ Of the 53 known provenanced sexual plaques, 11 are bed scenes, whereas 18 are tavern scenes. However, there are many unprovenanced bed scenes in museum and private collections. See note 46.



Fig. 4 Standing intercourse. The woman's raised thigh is just visible above the break. Nippur (3N-151). [Photo courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago]



Fig. 5 Bed scene. Modern impression made from a mold. Unprovenienced (VA 14514, 12.5 x 7.5 cm). [Photo author. Courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin]



Fig. 6 Bed scene. Isin (Iraq Museum, 6.8 x 5.8 cm). [Drawing after *Isin - Iān Bahriyāt II. Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen 1975-1978*, B. Hrouda, ed. (München 1981), pl. 28, IB 955]



Fig. 7. Bed scene. Bismaya (OI A361, 7.0 x 5.2 cm). [Photo author. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago]

as we know it from Old Babylonian "bridal hymns."⁴⁵ It is less standardized than the *coitus a tergo* drinking scenes, although there are several nearly identical unprovenanced pieces (e.g. Fig. 5).⁴⁶ There may be more than one reason for this variation. First, the Inanna-Dumuzi love poems recorded during the Old Babylonian period contain many thematic differences and inconsistencies. This suggests that diverse versions circulated in popular awareness and folk tradition, versions that were available to plaque artists.⁴⁷ Second, as home-style lovemaking belonged to the realm of the everyday, an artist could easily conjure a host of ways to represent it without sacrificing the audience's immediate recognition of the scene. By contrast, the tavern motif, which was taken not from quotidian life but from mythology or folk tradition, had to rely on a specific, fixed iconography for identification. Nevertheless, the bed motifs portray a standard theme suggestive of sensual and emotional bonding. A man and woman lie on a bed in what appears to be a side-by-side position, nearly always locked in a mutual gaze. The psychological and physical closeness exhibited in bed scenes parallels the loving emotional tone

of the poetry. Unlike tavern scenes, bed scenes present the male and female as having equal importance. This visual balance again reflects the dialogical nature of most love songs. In some reliefs, intercourse is not taking place; the lovers seem to be caught instead in a moment of pre-coital (or post-coital) tenderness (Fig. 6).⁴⁸ This is also true of the companion literary erotica, which usually sets the action just prior to intercourse when dramatic tension is at its height. Yet the literature also shows that "lying side by side" is one way of describing coitus, so that plaque artists, like poets, might have occasionally chosen the euphemistic over the graphic for representation.⁴⁹ Most of the unprovenanced bed scenes feature the lovers copulating while lying on their sides. Although this position was undoubtedly taken in the beds of ancient Mesopotamia, in terracottas it may actually portray the so-called missionary position turned sideways for the sake of readability.⁵⁰ The viewer can interpret it both ways. The man uses the plank at the foot of the bed for leverage.⁵¹ Only one relief attempts to portray the missionary position from a bird's eye view (Fig. 7). The plaque carver had to lay the man's body

⁴⁵ Although a majority of poems describe a domestic environment in which sex takes place in bed, as do the plaques, the divine couple trysts in other milieus as well, in sheepfolds, gardens and so forth. These variations may explain scenes of embrace in plaques that do not specify a locale. I suggest that plaque scenes of lovemaking, especially in bed but also standing and sitting, commemorate the ultimate moment of the couple's union, and in so doing, trigger the magic of the narrative and Inanna's enchanting sexuality.

⁴⁶ British Museum, BM 115719 (Cholidis 1992, no. 155) and BM 113181 (van Buren 1930, no. 1091; Blocher 1987, fig. 16; Cholidis 1992, no. 156). Louvre, AO 8662 (Barrelet 1968, no. 744; Cholidis 1992, no. 157). Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974.347.1. Erlenmeyer Collection (Seibert 1973, fig. 27b; Cholidis 1992, no. 153). Vorderasiatisches Museum, mold VA 14514 (Fig. 5, Cholidis 1992, no. 154).

⁴⁷ In Assante 2000:219-23 I argue on the basis of poetic structure that the majority of Inanna-Dumuzi love poems are oral folk ballads rather than court- or temple-written

literature. In my view, Akkadian scribes of the Old Babylonian edubba recorded popular poems, not just to preserve them and the fast-fading Sumerian tongue in which they were sung, but also to teach the phonetic writing of Sumerian to students.

⁴⁸ Coitus does not take place in Elamite bed scenes, of which there are 76 at the Louvre. See Spyket 1992.

⁴⁹ Inanna uses this euphemism when she says to Dumuzi: "Lying at (your) side – is my greatest joy, My sweet, let us delight ourselves on the couch!" Sefati 1998:180 ll. 15-16. For a second example, see below.

⁵⁰ By the "missionary position," I do not wish to imply sexual dysfunction. I use this terminology for convenience and to avoid even worse connotations of other terminologies, such as "male superior-female inferior position."

⁵¹ The function of the plank is clear from a sculpture group featuring copulation from Sais, Egypt in F. M. Wāṣif, "Soundings on the Borders of Ancient Sais." *OrAn* 13 (1974), pl. XXIII. See also Cholidis 1992:143.

diagonally over the woman underneath so that her body is sufficiently exposed for viewers to make sense of the action. She lies on her back in what closely resembles the squatting posture of the third typology, women in erotic display. Even though the couple's position is stiff and awkward, the artist took care to display the two lovers in a visual embrace.

Fortunately, we have a great deal of steamy literature from the Old Babylonian period that describes Inanna and her lover Dumuzi preparing for bed. Although these hymns are cast in the imagery of sexual mating, on a grander scale they are about propitious magical acts of attraction and seizure like the tavern hymns. They have other uses, primarily of a performative nature, that are explored elsewhere.⁵² Unexpectedly, the poems never mention conception or children, as Jerrold Cooper has noted (1989:89). Fertility magic, then, should not be numbered among the possible functions of these works.

The liminal nature of the bed, which sets the stage for magic making, is evidenced in these and other texts as well as in art. Obviously the bed is where mortals hover between worlds, either in dreaming and sleep

or in illness and dying. Omens and potency incantations suggest that the bed can be an area of psychic vulnerability, where possession, witchcraft or bad omens can take hold.⁵³ In the same wise, it is a place where exorcisms and other rites are frequently performed.⁵⁴ The supernatural, transformational significance of the bed underlies the Ur III and Isin-Larsa sacred marriage literature in which the king transmutes into a god in Inanna's bed.

Even though it is understood that Inanna and Dumuzi's desire will find fulfillment in the household bed, several of their love songs use other forms of the liminal, namely the doorway, as dramatic settings. Like the bed, the settings are usually metaphors for the body. Embedded in them are messages about passages into new life stages of sexual awakening and/or marriage. For instance, in some poems we find Inanna standing at the doorway of her house, which Dumuzi wants to enter. When he does, it is a formal gesture of marriage (Greengus 1966:66), of transition and a cause for celebration. In the love songs it is also a *double entendre* for sexual consummation. In one hymn, for example, the goddess stands at a doorway that is described as narrow and made of lapis lazuli.⁵⁵

⁵² I discuss possible functions of the Inanna-Dumuzi love songs in Assante 2000:56-63 and 224-31. Besides the magical aspects discussed here, the love songs might have helped inexperienced men and especially women to learn sexual behavior and response. Such aids would have been particularly useful in cultures such as ancient Mesopotamia's where marriages are arranged and the bride and groom are all but strangers to each other. The sexy content would ease anxieties and excite desire at the same time.

⁵³ The cuneiform literature on this phenomenon is not always explicit. But see Biggs 1967, A. Guinan's "Auguries of Hegemony: the Sex Omens of Mesopotamia" *Gender and History* 9/3 (Nov. 1997):462-79, and the material on demonic possession offered below.

⁵⁴ In a future article I will discuss art that features exorcisms performed on beds. Some scenes display a single patient on a bed, for instance an ED III votive plaque from Tell Asmar (OIP 44, fig. 199) and a late ED III seal (J. Asher-Greve, *Frauen in Altsumerischer Zeit*, Bibliotheaca Mesopotamica 18 [Malibu 1985], pl. XXX, fig. 593). Seals that portray intercourse on a bed, a scorpion

under the bed and an attendant or attendants at the head or feet of the lovers are also depictions of exorcisms. Most examples come from ED III levels, e.g., from Tell Asmar (OIP 72, fig. 559), Khafajeh (OIP 72, fig. 340) and Tell el-Wilayah (T. A. Madlum, "The Excavations at Tell al-Wilayah," *Sumer* 16 [1960], fig. 2). Curiously the motif survived in a seal from Cyprus, stylistically Middle Syrian (W. Orthmann, *Der Alte Orient, Propyläen Kunst Geschichte* 15, [Oldenburg, 1975], fig. 433 f).

⁵⁵ "At the lapis lazuli door which stands in the Gipar, the lord (Dumuzi) has met her (Inanna). At the narrow door which stands in the storehouse of Eanna, Dumuzi has met her" (Sefati 1998:250 ll. 30-31). In another work, the door bolts themselves are made from slick, dark lapis lazuli (Livingstone 1989:34). Dumuzi's entrance has also been imagined as moonlight spilling into the interior: "Dumuzi pushed open the door, Came forth into the house like the moonlight" (Sefati 1998:292 ii ll. 19-20), which reiterates the theme of penetration through a doorway. For a more obscure example that combines the moon entering the house and the door bolts coming open



Fig. 8 Nude female on a bed. Unprovenienced (Ox.1965.757, 12.0 cm). [Photo by courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford]

The careful inclusion of the doorway's dimensions no doubt alludes to Inanna's unopened vagina. As we have seen, lapis lazuli is an idealization for glossy black hair, which in erotic poetry can refer to pubic hair.⁵⁶ When Dumuzi enters, he either breaks her parapet – at her insistence⁵⁷ – or, in a later work, the door bolts themselves fly open in rejoicing.⁵⁸ In short, Dumuzi's arrival at her metaphoric threshold is far from an ordinary event; it signifies instead transition and expansion.

Just as tavern scenes draw on a cultural perception that conflates female sexuality with beer and its accoutrements, bed scenes play on a perception that imbricates the bed with the female body. Many of the Inanna-Dumuzi love songs feature Inanna ritually preparing her body as well as her bed for lovemaking. Both then are ritually prepared space, platforms for paranormal activity. Some terracotta model beds furnish further

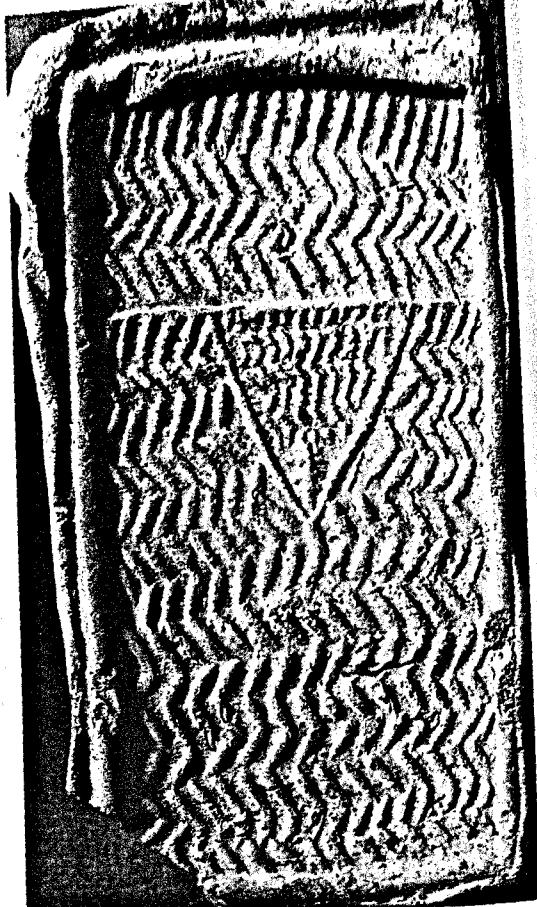


Fig. 9 Model bed with SAL sign. Nippur (University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania 3N-315, 14.6 x 7.5 cm). [Photo courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago]

contemporary examples of this conflation. In many, the female body barely emerges from the bed's surface (Fig. 8). In others only a vulva marks the bed, synecdoche for the body (Fig. 9).⁵⁹ It appears on the mattress as a triangle with a slash, the sign in Sumerian for SAL, meaning "woman," a single word that seems to label the bed. In one poem, Inanna literally "fills the bed" (*ki-ná mi-ni-in-sù-ga-ta*) and there soothes her lover's "heart," *šà* in Sumerian, which also stands for penis.⁶⁰ Finally, the bed or couch can refer to the sex act itself, some-

to receive it see Sefati 1998:269 i II. 11-18.

⁵⁶ For several examples of lapis lazuli vulvas offered to Ishtar see Farber 1976.

⁵⁷ Inanna orders Dumuzi: "Here stands our parapet, destroy our parapet" (Sefati 1998:269-70 I. 30).

⁵⁸ In this singular ballad Ishtar invites the Shepherd to spend the night, saying: "When you enter, may the bolts rejoice over you. May the door open of its own accord" (Black 1983:30). The reappearance of the doorway-to-

vaginal threshold equation in this and other later texts including first-millennium BCE works demonstrates the grip this imagery had on the popular imagination.

⁵⁹ See Cholides 1992, pls. 32-37 for more model beds with or without nudes.

⁶⁰ I have used a literal translation of the verb *sù-ga*, usually translated as "stretched out." The line comes from the poem "Iddin-Dagan A" in which the lover is named alternatively *Amaušumgalanna* (= Dumuzi) and

thing Inanna craves.⁶¹

In the following Sumerian hymn in which the goddess anticipates sex with Dumuzi who is here called by another name, the mark of the vulva is again present amidst a number of *double entendres*: The imbrication of bed with female body shows through in the imagery of wet lapis lazuli grass (*ú-za-gin-dur,-ru-[m]u*) strewn on the bed, which the poet has declared as Inanna's

own. The grass is reminiscent of her pubic hair that elsewhere in the erotica of this period is likened to plant matter that needs "watering," or to wet, grassy surfaces that should be ploughed.⁶² The imagery of the bed covered with a grass the color of wet lapis lazuli evokes the excited, hair-rimmed vagina and transforms the bed into a gigantic vulva ready for Dumuzi's plough.⁶³

- 40 When they erect my lustrous bed for him,
- 41 May they spread it for me with my wet lapis lazuli grass!⁶⁴
- 42 May they make the man enter my heart!
- 43 May they make enter for me there my Ama-ushum-galanna!⁶⁵
- 44 May they place his hand in my hand for me!⁶⁶
- 45 May they place his heart with my heart for me!

Interpreting the poem literally leaves some lines, such as 42, nonsensical. The innocent tone dissipates on a closer reading. The last line alone "May they place his heart with my heart for me" is rife with word plays. Since "heart" (*šà*) can also mean "interior,"

or "penis," the subtext of the line is: "May they place his penis in my interior for me."

The conflation of the bed with the aroused female body is taken further in poems where the bed, like the female's stimulated mouth and vagina, secretes a honey-sweet liquid.⁶⁷

the king Iddin-Dagan (Sefati 1998:105 ll. 189-90). For the meaning of *šà* as penis see the group of potency incantations entitled *šà.zi.ga*, "the rising of the heart," a metaphor for an erection (Biggs 1967).

⁶¹ 18..She (Inanna) has craved, she has craved, she has craved the couch,¹⁹ She has craved the couch that rejoices the heart, she has craved the couch,²⁰ She has craved the couch that sweetens the lap, she has craved the couch..." (Sefati 1998:304).

⁶² The use of vegetal similes for pubic hair is quite common in Old Babylonian erotic literature and may be an additional reason for conflating the bed, normally made of reed matting, with the vulva. Inanna frequently refers to her sexual anatomy as a wet field to be ploughed, like the bed's surface, or her pubic hair is "well-watered gakkul lettuce" (see note 36) or even "wet and well-watered ground" (Sefati 1998:90f). And when Inanna declares her sexual maturity, she exclaims, "Behold, our vulva has sprouted hair!" i-da-lam gal₄-la-me sig ba-an-mú (from Sefati 1998:135 l. 40A).

⁶³ 40 giš-ná-gi₄-rin-na-mu un-na-ab-gub-bu-ne ⁴¹ú-za-gin-dur,-ru-[m]u dè-ma-ab-bar₃-ge-ne ⁴²me-e mu-l[u] *šà*-ba-mu dè-ma-ni-ib-ku₄-ku₄-ne ⁴³ama-ušumgal-an-na-mu dè-ma-ni-ib-ku₄-ku₄-ne ⁴⁴šu-ni šu-mu-ta dè-má'-da-ma-ma-ne. Transliteration from Sefati 1998:248.

⁶⁴ Sefati (1998:250) translates: "May they spread it for me with my herbs (whose hue is like) the greenish lapis lazuli (stones)." Parenthetical additions were needed to make sense of the line. The word "greenish" that I trans-

late as "wet," *duru*, or *dur₃-ru*, is attested elsewhere meaning "wet," "juicy," "ripe." See "A Hymn to Inanna and Her Self Praise," and *gal₄-la-mu dur₃-ru-am*, "my vagina is wet" (Sjöberg 1988:171). Akkadian borrowed the Sumerian in *zaginduru*, possibly lapis lazuli with a wet-looking surface.

⁶⁵ The name Amaushumgalanna is interchangeable with Dumuzi. Apparently, they were originally separate gods. In some songs only the name Amaushumgalanna appears, while in others, Dumuzi. Sometimes the two names appear in the same work. Sefati postulates that the differences may be due to variations in local traditions (Sefati 1998:75).

⁶⁶ "Hand" (*šu*) is sometimes a stand-in for "penis." See Shalom Paul's contribution in this volume: "The Shared Legacy of Sexual Metaphors and Euphemisms in Mesopotamian and Biblical Literature," pp. 489-98.

⁶⁷ 10 šeš-e é-ni-a im-ma-ni-in-ku₄-re-en ¹¹mu-ná-lál-hába bi-in-ná-e ¹²zé-ba-kal-la-mu *šà*-ab-mu a-ba-ná ¹³dili-dili-ta eme-ak dili-dili-ta ¹⁴šeš-i-bí-sa₆-sa₆-mu 50-ám mu-un-ak ¹⁵lú-si-ga-gim mu-na-dè-GUB ¹⁶ki-ta-tuku₄-e-da si-a mu-na-ni-in-gar ¹⁷šeš-mu fb-ba-na *šu* gíd-dé ¹⁸zé-ba-kal-la-mu u₄ mu-un-di-ni-ib-zal-e.

The source of the transliteration is from tablets UM 29-16-18 o. and NBC 10923 r., copies of which are on plates IV and VI respectively in Sefati 1998. The poem or portions of it have been translated by Kramer (1963: 509-10 and 1969:103f), Jacobsen in *JANES* 5 (1973), 199-212 and Jacobsen (1976:27f and 1987:8f), Alster (1993:22f) and Sefati (1998:151-53).

- 10 The brother brought me into his house.
- 11 He lay me on a bed dripping with honey!
- 12 My precious sweet when lying next to my heart,
- 13 One by one, making tongues, one by one!
- 14 My brother of beautiful eyes, it is fifty times he made it!
- 15 Like a weak person, I was hardly able to stand (serve?) there with him!
- 16 Trembling from the ground up, I fell silent for him there!
- 17 My brother, I stretch (my) hand out to his hips.⁶⁸
- 18 My precious sweet, I passed the day with him.

This charming passage goes beyond the point of sexual anticipation by describing orgasm. It is just one more demonstration of the way Mesopotamians of this period fused genital and oral stimuli of touch and taste. Although this passage seems to be more performative in nature than magical, it still draws on an exalted cultural view of sex as inducing an altered state of wonder.

When Inanna incites desire in her lover and he passes through her metaphoric entranceway, the result is material abundance and happiness. In Inanna's own words, "Your coming hither – is life, Your entering the house – is abundance, Lying at (your) side – is my greatest joy."⁶⁹ The gift giving that is frequently present in the love poems seems to symbolize the increase expected from successful magic making.⁷⁰ This is unequivocal in sacred marriage texts. In these

royal hymns of praise, the goddess grants the king divinity, the right of rule, long life as well as plenty for the land, after he has pleased her in bed. Clearly we are looking at a fundamentally mystical process couched in the terminology of mating. After all, sex itself does not bring abundance or even necessarily joy; magic does. The potency of the royal mythology depends to some degree on mimesis of the paradigmatic divine couple, Inanna and Dumuzi. Since the innate magical agency of these lovers continued to be exploited well into the first millennium,⁷¹ there can be little doubt that images of their lovemaking would have been regarded as enormously potent. Combining the strengths of both personas in one image and placing it within the bordered field of the bed's ritual space serve to intensify that potency.

⁶⁸ This line varies. The Yale version, NBC 10923 r. l. 17, employs the verb šu—gíd, "to stretch the hand out," possibly alluding to manual manipulation of the penis and its erection: "I stretch the hand/penis out at his hips." In tablet UM 29-16-18 o. l. 17, the line is šu gub-bu-dè, "I place the hand on his hip." As gub also means "to stand," the line may contain the same allusions: "I make stand the penis at his hips."

⁶⁹ Sefati 1998:180 ll. 13-15.

⁷⁰ Sefati 1998 offers numerous Sumerian examples. In some poems from this volume, the boons Inanna's lover will bring "into the house" are elaborately listed (e.g. "The Bridal Sheets and the Chosen Bridegroom," "Behold, Our Breasts Became Firm," "Dumuzi's Wedding," "The Shepherd and the Farmer,"), while in others, Inanna

is the giver or she transfers onto her lover magical qualities (e.g. "A Blessing of Abundance for the Bridegroom," "The Blessing of Amaušumgalanna in the Ekur"), just as she does in royal sacred marriage texts. Abundance is also at hand in the poetic surroundings of riches and plenty or implicit in epithetical descriptions, such as when Inanna refers to Dumuzi as her milk and her cream ("Oh That I Might Know the Way to My Beloved"). The recitation of gifts, either promised or received, frequently appears in Mesopotamian love literature of most periods and seems to have played an aphrodisiac role.

⁷¹ See the collection of incantations involving Ishtar and Dumuzi in Farber 1976. The couple was called on to control the forces of illness, a use not much different from the use of their image in terracotta plaques.

Mating and Espousal: Analogies for White and Black Magic

In the Old Babylonian period sex with Inanna whether in bed or in the tavern made white magic. Like her aroused body, her wet, grassy or honey-dripping bed, her wet honey-sweet or beery vulva and mouth, are signifiers for supernaturally charged zones, the active loci of transformation. In the visual and written erotica of this period her thresholds inevitably bring about wonder, joy and increase. As just noted, for kings it brought long life, in fact, instant divinity, and prosperity to their lands. Plaques displaying propitious mythic events in the imagery of intercourse can sympathetically attract the auspicious into the home to which the householder becomes effectively united, or, more properly, mated.

The opposite situation helps to elucidate how this works. An Old Babylonian exorcism rite describes the means by which malignant spirits gain power over their victims. What is important to this argument is that the relationship between demon and victim is cast in the imagery of mating and espousal.⁷² The victim becomes wedded to evil and woes. In general, the verb *hâru*, “to pick and take as a mate,” can apply to the action of demons and witches who take victims and, in effect, marry them to a lifetime of miseries, paralysis, weeping or death. A sorcerer or witch can “mate” or “espouse” victims to anything evil, including even the dead. In the same vein, in order to get rid of disease or any affliction, the Mesopotamian could “espouse” it to someone or something else, such as a piglet.⁷³ The malignant activities of the unseen were moreover concep-

tualized in terms of seizure and stealth.⁷⁴ A text from Old Babylonian Sippar speaks of the “evil eye” that swoops down like an ensnaring net, again the dark inverse of Inanna as the net in the tavern hymn cited above.⁷⁵ Although such acts are the sinister counterpoints to Inanna’s mating, espousal and seizure, the process is largely the same and equally figurative. Attraction results in capture and the transference of evil or good. Ultimately, the quality of life radically shifts.

As most misfortunes were thought to have supernatural origins, either sent by the gods, by witchcraft or wrought by evil spirits, invasions, illness, untimely death, famine, poverty, and so on, were often fought against on psychic rather than physical planes. Since the constellation of Inanna’s erotic plaques and poems reverses the negative application of mating, marriage and seizure found in other magical literature, its potential as apotropaia seems to be more than a reasonable hypothesis. Plaques may be the physical remains of counteractive measures a householder might have taken to prevent the disastrous occurrence of “mating” with evil, in whatever form it might arrive. Through the operations of a powerful and well-understood analogue encoded in images of happy coupling, a householder who owns such an image could, instead, be mated to good.

There is a set of demons known from the third millennium and later that is particularly prone to sexually prey on people, the *lilû*, *lilitu* and *ardat-lilî* demons. These enter

⁷² Greengus 1969:516.

⁷³ CAD H:119.

⁷⁴ The use of “release” formulas to break the grip of black magic in later texts makes this clear. The “Hand of Man” meant black sorcery had seized a person, as did the “Hand of Ishtar,” which could lead to any manner of ills. The “Hand of a Ghost” brought impotency. Or the “foot

of evil” could creep into the house, causing unexpected deaths. See Maul 1999, Stol 1999.

⁷⁵ A. Cavigneaux and F. N. H. al-Rawi, “Charmes de Sippar et de Nippur,” *Cinquante-deux réflexions sur le Proche-Orient ancien offertes en hommage à Léon de Meyer*, H. Gasche et al., eds., Leuven 1994, 85ff; van der Toorn 1996:122f.

houses through the liminal zones of doorways and windows in search of victims whom they “seize” (*sabātu*) or with whom they “mate” (*harū*).⁷⁶ Even though *lilū* demons are etymologically associated with wind, they are also believed to be the restless spirits of people who died too young to marry; after death, they are compelled to seek out victims as husbands and wives. Apparently, their invitations to marriage (i.e. sexual union) can be very persuasive and include the promise of vast riches as well as the legal phraseology of marriage rites.⁷⁷ Should mating take place, the unhappy mortal meets an early death, thus adding to the next generation of the *lilū* clan. These demons were also thought to be responsible for such symptoms as paralysis, headache, possibly epilepsy and sickness in

general. Sexual dysfunction is not attributed to them. It is quite apparent that the mating habits of the night-hunting *lilū* are not about sex and marriage but about the processes of attraction and seizure in black magic. Significantly, the *lilū* family could not affect humans without Ishtar’s permission. Sexual plaques may have specialized in subduing *lilū* demons by invoking the protection of those aspects of Inanna/Ishtar (and her partners) that were concerned with sexual mating, the *harimtu* and the bride-to-be, in addition to the more generalized services of Old Babylonian terracotta plaques. Overall, the erotic plaques could be read as tools of sympathetic magic that blocked the death-bringing embrace of any evil force with *kuzbu*-charged images of a life-bringing embrace.

Spread-Legged Females

The third typology features single nude women, standing, sitting or squatting, with their thighs parted (Figs. 10-12). Iconicity, a property of all terracotta plaques, is particularly apparent in this set of motifs whose centered and framed subjects are frontal.⁷⁸ The datable plaques of this type, with or without phalli, are latecomers to the stock of plaque motifs, occurring during or after the time of Hammurabi. They are further localized to northern Babylonia (Assante 2000:173-77). The spread-legged female is therefore not a pan-Mesopotamian plaque type and does not seem to have shared origins with other sexual plaque themes of greater and more enduring popu-

larity. Nor does it cite a setting that would cue the viewer to the scene’s folk or mythological source. Furthermore, there is nothing in these images to connect them with Inanna/Ishtar. Finally, in some (e.g. Fig. 11) the woman squats on a stool, furniture that has no associations with the liminal or with any specific environment, domestic or otherwise, in cuneiform texts.

Despite these dissimilarities with other sexual motifs, images of spread-legged females still drew on the inherent magical power of the sexualized liminal body for prophylactic use. In fact, the notion of employing sexual imagery for psychic defense was hardly confined to Mesopotamia. The

⁷⁶ The background on this family of demons is taken from Farber 1987-90, Porada 1987-90, Scurlock 1991 and 1995, and CAD A:241f and L:190. Porada connects the *ardat lili* with the plaque figure of the winged and taloned she-demon, as in the Burney Relief. In later traditions, *ardat lili* is associated with the baby-snatching

lamassu and Lilith.

⁷⁷ Greengus 1969:516 n. 53. The phrase is “You be the wife, and I will be your husband.”

⁷⁸ For the important role iconicity played in the processes of household magic see Assante 2002.

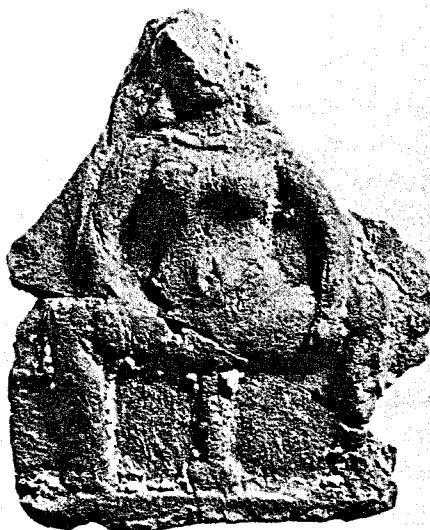


Fig. 10 Spread-legged female with phallus. Tell ed-Dér (9.4 × 7.5 cm). [Photo courtesy of Imprimerie Orientaliste, Louvain]



Fig. 11 Spread-legged female on a stool. Head broken off. Kish (Ox.1924.259, 9.0 × 7.1 cm). [Photo author. By courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford]



Fig. 12 Standing spread-legged female with phallus. Isin (11.6 × 7.8 cm). [Drawing from *Isin – Isān Bahriyat III. Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen 1983–1984*, B. Hrouda, ed. (München 1987), pl. 21, no. 14]

ethnographic record shows protective genital amulets as exceptionally widespread.⁷⁹ Phallic talismans are perhaps the most comprehensible as defensive tools for they incorporate ideas of male aggression and strength in one emblem.⁸⁰ Less recognized is that the display of female genitalia, as in this terracotta motif, has performed a similar function, particularly in India where goddesses take spread-legged positions (Figs. 13-14) that closely resemble those from Old Babylonian Mesopotamia. In Medieval India, exposing sexual organs, male or female, was believed to render the enemy helpless (Desai 1985:94). The Mesopotamian typology of the spread-legged female with phallus combines the vulva and the

tumescent phallus, similar to a talisman, and thus doubles the image's potency in the most condensed and jolting form possible. It is the best candidate of the erotic types to have a purely protective function. Nevertheless, images of sexual coupling in general were also used defensively outside of Mesopotamia. In Southeast Asia, they were put at doorways as early as the second century.⁸¹ Texts from the fifth to ninth centuries specifically call for the display of *mithunas* or "loving couples" at temple doorways as magical, auspicious symbols.⁸² Unexpectedly, these ethnographic examples support the primarily nonsexual functions of erotic plaques. At the simplest level, sexual plaques could have exploited

⁷⁹ *Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, A. Ellis and A. Abarbanel, eds. (New York, 1961), Vol. XII:898.

⁸⁰ The Romans, for instance, carried priapic figures against the evil eye and to avert bad luck, a practice sustained in Europe into the Middle Ages (*Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. II:821). Phallic charms have been used for protection in India, Egypt, Greece, Italy, Russia and Eastern Europe (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* [1918], third edition, 1951, Vol. V:612, and B. Z. Goldenberg, *The Sacred Fire, the Story of Sex in Religion* [London 1937], 63). In England they continued in use into the eighteenth century. See Richard Payne

Knight, *A Discourse on Worship of Priapus* (1786), reproduced by Knight and Wright in *Sexual Symbolism* (New York, 1961).

⁸¹ J. Ferguson and J. Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India* (London, 1880), pl. XX. The specific cave (Cave III) was not a temple but rather a house for Buddhist ascetics.

⁸² The texts *Brihatsamhita*, *Hayasirsha-pancharatra* and *Agni-purana* all dictated the motif for temple doorways. See Krishna Deva and Darshan Lall, *Khajuraho* (New Delhi, 1986), 171-203.



Fig. 13. Nude goddess in *uttanapad* pose. Alumpur, India. 8th century. [Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi]



Fig. 14. Nude goddess with phallus. Kanorak, India. 13th century. [Photo courtesy of Dileep Purohit]

the desire they incited to protect the householder, for when malicious demons encounter sexual images, they can become temporarily stunned by the rush of arousal and therefore disarmed.

Since the postures of spread-legged females are iconographic rather than "natural," they must also have identified the subject and purpose of the motif for the contemporary viewer. As all provenienced spread-legged female types are from northern Babylonia, the source of the scene was probably local tradition. From the same region, specifically Isin, comes an incantation whose verbal charm oddly fits the imagery of the spread-legged female with a phallus between her legs, a plaque type likewise found in Isin (Fig. 12). The pertinent magical phrases are "I sexually penetrate myself, I sexually penetrate my body," *arahhi ramānima arahhi pagri*.⁸³ These lines and closely related versions involving self-penetration appear in magical works from the Old Babylonian period and the first millennium.⁸⁴ The Akkadian verb *rehû*, used here reflexively, means "to copulate," "to inseminate" and so forth. More importantly, it can also mean "to enchant" or "cast a spell," a meaning that categorically applies to all sexual plaques.⁸⁵ The phraseology occurs occasionally in love magic, but generally its use is prophylactic in nature, including protection against or cure for scorpion bites. The reciter fills his or her own body with the power of a spell (Cooper 1996:52), while obstructing the infiltration of harm; the threshold is thus closed to all but the beneficent. This is the same sort of magic encoded in sexual imagery that I argue for intercourse scenes. Images of women riding on phalli might well be the visual equiva-

⁸³ See Cooper 1996, on which the present philological discussion is based. Earlier lines of this text are given above. See p. 33 and n. 28.

⁸⁴ Old Babylonian: *YOS* 11.2, *TM* 9.73r.

⁸⁵ Attested in the D stem, *AHw*:969b. The noun *ruhû* means "witchcraft." In an Old Babylonian text from Tell Hadad, the verb *rehû* is exchanged for *wašāpu*, which also means "to enchant" (Cooper 1996:49f).

lents of this prophylactic charm known from the same period and places. What is more, the female in this particular typology is marked from other spread-legged females by her multiple collars, which seems to alert viewers to her specific identity. Significantly, Isin incantations include the line: *šehiṣ uzzu ša Nanaya*, meaning “Mount, Oh Ferocity of Nanaya!” or “Attack, Oh Ferocity of

Nanaya!,”⁸⁶ raising the intriguing possibility that the image of the collared spread-legged female with phallus represents Nanaya. During this period, the sexual qualities of this goddess, also called *bēlet kuzbim*, as well as the functions she performs, are nearly inextricable from Inanna/Ishtar’s and her cult.⁸⁷

Conclusion:

From what can be gleaned from cuneiform texts, Old Babylonian visual erotica seems to have drawn on three different traditions of *bēlet kuzbim*: one as Inanna the tavern *harimtu*, another as Inanna the bride to be, and a third, possibly local, tradition of her sidekick Nanaya. The bed and tavern plaque images would entice the goddess’s favor, if not her actual presence, by presenting those things most pleasing to her – sex, beer and beds – and by flattering her with celebratory commemorations of her sexual exploits. On one level then, the plaques enlist divine favor in a way not dissimilar from any recited hymn of praise or ritual offering. The sexual formulations were devised to appeal to specific aspects of the deity; they are merely vehicles of the main aim. In the same vein, when a Mesopotamian petitions the goddess’s warrior aspect, he or she uses images of her triumph in combat and the carnage she causes. Whether the imagery is masked in the guise of sex or war,

it is not about the one or the other. It is about appealing to the supernatural force behind the guise. Perhaps her erotic stories, presented in abbreviated form, mobilized Inanna and the power of her myths for action in the here and now of Old Babylonian times. Such a phenomenon was known from later periods in which a written excerpt from mythology (rather than a picture) was copied onto a tablet to activate the divine protagonist for protection against plague (Reiner 1960). Thus liberated and available for action, Inanna would have been a tremendously dynamic agent of protection and beneficence for the Old Babylonian household. In image and texts, we can perceive her positive magic operating through the analogies of mating and espousal, or Nanaya’s through self-penetration, analogies whose potency is amplified by a panoply of *kuzbu*-infused metaphors and similes. Grafting sex onto the magical process can do nothing but enhance emotional intensity, a factor vital

⁸⁶ As Cooper notes (1996:54 n. 26), the verb, *šahātu*, has other meanings in addition “to mount,” which refers to sexual mounting, such as “jump,” “leap,” “jerk,” “convulse” and “attack.”

⁸⁷ Like Inanna/Ishtar, Nanaya was sometimes referred to as the daughter of An and the sister of Utu. Although both were called *harimtu*’s and are associated with taverns, in other texts Nanaya is frequently a wife. Unlike Inanna/Ishtar, there are no myths about her; she appears occasionally in hymns and more frequently in incantations. She is rarely mentioned in royal sacred marriage texts

and does not possess the me’s; these provinces were Inanna’s. She, like Inanna/Ishtar, had the singular capacity to change genders. Both are associated with the lion. For background see Reiner 1974, Leick 1991:125, Westenholz 1997, Stol 1998, among others. In Ur III times Nanaya was worshipped in Inanna’s E-anna Temple at Uruk. The cult was brought to Kish in the Old Babylonian period (Charpin 1986:403-15 and 1992:211f). In the Isin-Larsa period, she seems to have been at Inanna/Ishtar’s command (Leick 1994:185).

to magic's effectiveness. The stories as well as the incantation rhetoric also work to establish positive intent. The liminal, the locale where the invisible affects the visible, takes many forms; not least is the plaque itself as a site of paranormal intervention. Chief among the liminal are Inanna's, and to a lesser extent Nanaya's, body portals of

mouth, vulva and anus, oozing with a heady sweetness. These attract and seize the auspicious for the plaque owner, and, like charms filled to brimming with divine force, can also block evil. Thus the goddess's body and her literally spellbinding sexuality were important instruments of Old Babylonian household magic.

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