

Lamassu





Human-headed winged bull, otherwise known as a Šedu from Dur-Sharrukin. University of Chicago Oriental Institute. Gypsum (?) Neo-Assyrian Period, c. 721-705 BCE



Lamassu at the Louvre.



A **lamassu** (Cuneiform: , AN.KAL; Sumerian: ^dlammař; Akkadian: *lamassu*; sometimes called a **lamasus**^{[1][2]}) is an Assyrian protective deity, often depicted as having a human's head, a body of an ox or a lion, and bird's wings.^[3] In some writings, it is portrayed to represent a female deity.^{[4][5]} A less frequently used name is **shedū** (Cuneiform: , AN.KAL×BAD; Sumerian: ^dalad; Akkadian, *šēdu*; Hebrew: שֵׁד) which refers to the male counterpart of a lamassu.^[6] The Lammasu or Lumasi represent the zodiacs, parent-stars or constellations.^{[7][8]}

Large lamassu figures up to nearly 5 metres high are spectacular showpieces in Assyrian sculpture, where they are the largest figures known to have been made.

1 Iconography

In art, lamassu were depicted as hybrids, either winged bulls or lions with the head of a human male. The motif of a winged animal with a human head is common to the Near East, first recorded in Ebla around 3000 BCE. The first distinct lamassu motif appeared in Assyria during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser II as a symbol of power.^{[9][10]}

Assyrian sculpture typically placed prominent pairs of lamassu at entrances in palaces, facing the street and also internal courtyards. They were “double-aspect” figures on corners, in high relief. From the front they appear to stand, and from the side, walk, and in earlier ver-

sions have five legs, as is apparent when viewed obliquely. Lamassu do not generally appear as large figures in the low-relief schemes running round palace rooms, where winged genie figures are common, but they sometimes appear within narrative reliefs, apparently protecting the Assyrians.^[11]

The colossal entrance way figures were often followed by a hero grasping a wriggling lion, also colossal and in high relief. In the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, a group of at least seven lamassu and two such heros with lions surrounded the entrance to the “throne room”, “a concentration of figures which produced an overwhelming impression of power.”^[12] They also appear on cylinder seals. Notable examples include those at the Gate of All Nations at Persepolis in Iran, the British Museum in London, the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Oriental Institute, Chicago. Several examples left *in situ* in northern Iraq have been destroyed in the 2010's by ISIS when they occupied the area.

2 Terminology

The Lammasu or Lumasi represent the zodiacs, parent-stars, or constellations.^{[7][8]} They are depicted as protective deities because they encompass all life within them. In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh they are de-

picted as physical deities as well, which is where the Lammasu iconography originates, these deities could be microcosms of their microcosmic zodiac, parent-star, or constellation. Although “lamassu” had a different iconography and portrayal in Sumerian culture, the terms *lamassu*, *alad*, and *shedu* evolved throughout the Assyro-Akkadian culture from the Sumerian culture to denote the Assyrian-winged-man-bull symbol and statues during the Neo-Assyrian empire. Female lamassus were called “apsasû”.^[3]



Five-legged Lamassu in Berlin, with lion's feet

The motif of the Assyrian-winged-man-bull called Alad-lammu and Lamassu interchangeably is not the lamassu or alad of Sumerian origin which were depicted with different iconography. These monumental statues were called aladlammû or lamassu which meant “protective spirit”.^[3] In Hittite, the Sumerian form ^dLAMMA is used both as a name for the so-called “tutelary deity”, identified in certain later texts with *Inara*, and a title given to similar protective gods.^[13]

3 Mythology

The lamassu is a celestial being from ancient Mesopotamian religion bearing a human head, bull's body, sometimes with the horns and the ears of a bull, and wings. It appears frequently in Mesopotamian art. The lamassu and shedu were household protective spirits of the common Babylonian people, becoming associated later as royal protectors, were placed as sentinels at



The Lamassu in Persepolis

the entrances.^[14] The Akkadians associated the god Papsukkal with lamassu and the god Išum with shedu.

To protect houses, the lamassu were engraved in clay tablets, which were then buried under the door's threshold. They were often placed as a pair at the entrance of palaces. At the entrance of cities, they were sculpted in colossal size, and placed as a pair, one at each side of the door of the city, that generally had doors in the surrounding wall, each one looking towards one of the cardinal points.

The ancient Jewish people were influenced by the iconography of Assyrian culture. The prophet *Ezekiel* wrote about a fantastic being made up of aspects of a human being, a lion, an eagle and a bull. Later, in the early Christian period, the four Gospels were ascribed to each of these components. When it was depicted in art, this image was called the *Tetramorph*.

4 In modern culture

The British 10th Army, which operated in Iraq and Iran in 1942-1943, adopted the Lamassu as its insignia. A winged bull with the head of a bearded man appears on the logo of the United States Forces - Iraq.

A bull with a man's head is found among the creatures that make up Aslan's army in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. He appears at the Stone Table, challenging the White Witch “with a great bellowing voice”. In the film *Alexander* (2004), Lamassu are seen at the Ishtar Gate in Babylon. In the Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992), a gold Lamassu can be found in the scene where Aladdin and Abu enter the cave in the desert to find the lamp.

A Northwestern University professor won a Fourth Plinth commission to recreate the Lamassu that stood in Nineveh, Iraq, from 700 BC until it was destroyed by ISIS in 2015, Michael Rakowitz's sculpture will be displayed in London's Trafalgar Square beginning in 2018.^[15]

4.1 Games

Lammasu [sic] and shedu are two distinct types of good-aligned creatures in the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Lammasu also appear in the *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game as the white card Hunted Lammasu^[16] in the *Ravnica: City of Guilds* expansion, as well as the white card Venerable Lammasu^[17] found in the *Khans of Tarkir* expansion.

In the Games Workshop miniatures wargame, *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, the Lamasu was a mount for the Chaos Dwarf army. It has since returned as part of the *Storm of Magic* expansion release. A Lammasu briefly appears in the *Fablehaven* series.

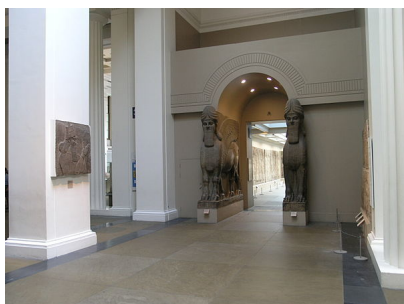
5 Gallery



- The British Museum - Human Headed Winged Lions and Reliefs from Nimrud with the Gates of Balawat



- The British Museum - Human Headed Winged Bulls from Khorsabad



- The British Museum - Human Headed Winged Lion and Bull

from Nimrud, companion pieces in Metropolitan Museum of Art



- Musée du Louvre - Human Headed Winged Bulls from Khorsabad, otherwise known as Lamassu's



- Musée du Louvre - Human Headed Winged Bulls, Sculpture and Reliefs from Khorsabad, note the Lamassu in the foreground is a cast from the Oriental Institute, Chicago



- Musée du Louvre - Human Headed Winged Bulls and Reliefs from Khorsabad, in their wider setting of reliefs



- Musée du Louvre - Human Headed Winged Bulls and Reliefs from Khorsabad



- The Metropolitan Museum of Art - Human Headed Winged Lion and Bull from Nimrud, companion pieces to those in the British Museum



- British 10th Army insignia



- Detail, Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago. Gypsum(?), Khorsabad, entrance to the throne room, c. 721-705 B.C



- The entrance of a Fire temple in Fort Mumbai displaying a Lamassu

6 See also



- Cuneiform writing on the back of a Lamassu in the University of Chicago Oriental Institute.



- Modern impression of Achaemenid cylinder seal, 5th century BCE. A winged solar disc legitimises the Persian king who subdues two rampant Mesopotamian lamassu figures

- Anzû (older reading: Zû), Mesopotamian monster
- Apis
- Buraq
- Cherub
- Chimera, Greek mythological hybrid monster
- Enlil
- Fire Temples
- Griffin or griffon, lion-bird hybrid
- Jinn
- Kamadhenu, Hindu bovine goddess
- Manticore, Persian sphinx-like creature
- Minotaur
- Mythological hybrid
- List of hybrid creatures in mythology
- Pegasus, winged stallion in Greek mythology

- **Sharabha**, Hindu mythology: lion-bird hybrid
- **Simurgh**, Iranian mythical flying creature
- **Sphinx**, mythical creature with lion's body and human head
- **Yali**, Hindu mythological lion-elephant-horse hybrid
- **Ziz**, giant griffin-like bird in Jewish mythology

7 Notes

- [1] Kriwaczek, Paul. *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*, p. 37.
- [2] <http://www.torrossa.it/resources/an/2401509#page=241>
- [3] Livius.org
- [4] Beaulieu, Paul-Alain. *The Pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian Period*. Retrieved 9 December 2010.
- [5] "The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary". Retrieved 9 December 2010.
- [6] Black, Jeremy; Green, Anthony (2003). *An Illustrated dictionary, Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*. The British Museum Press. ISBN 0-7141-1705-6.
- [7] Hewitt, J.F. *History and Chronology of the Myth-Making Age*. p. 85.
- [8] W. King, Leonard. *Enuma Elish Vol 1 & 2: The Seven Tablets of Creation; The Babylonian and Assyrian Legends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind*. p. 78.
- [9] "History - Mesopotamia". BBC.
- [10] "Lamassu". ancientneaeast.net.
- [11] Frankfort, 147-148
- [12] Frankfort, 147-148, 148 quoted
- [13] Gregory McMahon, The Hittite State Cult of the Tutelary Deities. *Oriental Institute Assyriological Studies*, no. 25
- [14] Castor, Marie-José. "Winged human-headed bull". Louvre.fr. Retrieved February 19, 2017.
- [15] "The Lamassu, Resurrected".
- [16] "Hunted Lammasu".
- [17] "Venerable Lammasu".
- [18] "Assyrian Human Headed Winged Lion and Bull (Lamassu)". *Smarthistory at Khan Academy*. Retrieved January 8, 2013.

8 References

- Frankfort, Henri, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, Pelican History of Art, 4th ed 1970, Penguin (now Yale History of Art), ISBN 0140561072

9 External links

- [Webpage about the Šēdu in the Louvre Museum \(French\)](#)

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