

**PERCEPTIONS OF THE SERPENT IN
THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST:
ITS BRONZE AGE ROLE IN
APOTROPAIC MAGIC, HEALING AND
PROTECTION**

by

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Snake

I am
The Beginning and the End,
The Protector and the Healer,
The Primordial Creator,
Wisdom, all-knowing,
Duality,
Life, yet the terror in the darkness.

I am
Creation and Chaos,
The water and the fire.
I am all of this,
I am
Snake.

I rise with the lotus
From muddy concepts of Nun.
I am the protector of kings
And the fiery eye of Ra.

I am the fiery one,
The dark one,
Leviathan
Above and below,
The all-encompassing ouroboros,
I am
Snake.

(Wendy Golding 2012)

SUMMARY

In this dissertation I examine the role played by the ancient Near Eastern serpent in apotropaic and prophylactic magic. Within this realm the serpent appears in roles in healing and protection where magic is often employed. The possibility of positive and negative roles is investigated. The study is confined to the Bronze Age in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. The serpents, serpent deities and deities with ophidian aspects and associations are described. By examining these serpents and deities and their roles it is possible to incorporate a comparative element into his study on an intra- and inter-regional basis.

In order to accumulate information for this study I have utilised textual and pictorial evidence, as well as artefacts (such as jewellery, pottery and other amulets) bearing serpent motifs.

KEY TERMS

amulet; Apophis; Ašerah; Bašmu; *Brooklyn Papyrus*; chaos; deity; Eve; healing; healing serpent; Inanna; Isis; Ištar; Leviathan; magic; magician; medicine; mušhuššu; Nehuštan; Ningizzida; protection; protective serpent; serpent; snake; snake charmer; snake priest; staff; Tiamat

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of illustrations	xxi
List of tables.....	xxvi

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.2	RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES	3
1.2.1	Research problem	3
1.3	HYPOTHESIS	4
1.4	AIMS OF STUDY	5
1.5	A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW	6
1.5.1	Primary sources.....	6
1.5.2	Secondary sources	7
1.6	METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	9
1.6.1	Research design and approach	9
<i>1.6.1.1</i>	<i>Theoretical framework.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>1.6.1.2</i>	<i>System of tables.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>1.6.1.3</i>	<i>Cross-cultural and interregional study.....</i>	<i>10</i>
1.6.2	Delimitations and limitations of the study	11
<i>1.6.2.1</i>	<i>Delimitations.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>1.6.2.2</i>	<i>Limitations</i>	<i>11</i>
1.6.3	Structure of the dissertation and outline of chapters	12

CHAPTER TWO

MAGIC IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

2.1	DEFINING MAGIC	16
2.2	THE FUNCTIONING OF MAGIC	18
2.2.1	Egypt	19
<i>2.2.1.1</i>	<i>Magic and religion.....</i>	<i>19</i>

2.2.1.2	<i>Magic as a tool against evil and illness</i>	20
2.2.1.3	<i>Negative ailments and entities</i>	20
2.2.1.4	<i>Spells</i>	21
2.2.2	Mesopotamia	21
2.2.2.1	<i>Magic for the gods and humankind</i>	21
2.2.2.2	<i>Suffering and the gods</i>	22
2.2.2.3	<i>Suffering and the ancestors</i>	22
2.2.2.4	<i>Omens</i>	23
2.2.2.5	<i>A holistic approach</i>	23
2.2.3	Syria-Palestine	23
2.3	APOTROPAIC MAGIC AND AMULETS.....	24
2.3.1	The meaning of ‘amulet’	25
2.3.2	The purpose of amulets	25
2.3.3.	The functioning of amulets	26
2.3.4	Objects as amulets	27
2.3.4.1	<i>Sumerians</i>	27
2.3.4.2	<i>Egyptians</i>	28
2.3.4.3	<i>Syria-Palestine</i>	29
2.3.5	Words as amulets	29
2.3.5.1	<i>Mythology as an amulet</i>	30
2.4	MAGIC PRACTITIONERS AND SNAKE HANDLERS.....	30
2.4.1	Practitioners in ancient Egypt	31
2.4.1.1	<i>Magicians and medicine</i>	31
2.4.1.2	<i>Priestly magicians</i>	32
2.4.1.3	<i>Training of physicians</i>	33
2.4.1.4	<i>Snake charmers in Egypt</i>	34
2.4.2	Practitioners in Mesopotamia	34
2.4.2.1	<i>Magicians and physicians</i>	34
2.4.2.2	<i>Training of magicians</i>	34
2.4.2.3	<i>Snake charmers</i>	36
2.4.2.4	<i>Snake priests</i>	36
2.4.3	Practitioners in Syria-Palestine	37
2.4.3.1	<i>The ḥakam</i>	37
2.4.3.2	<i>Moses and Aaron as magicians</i>	37

2.4.3.3	<i>Priests as diagnostics of illness</i>	38
2.4.3.4	<i>Levites as members of a snake tribe</i>	38
2.4.3.5	<i>Snake charmers at Ugarit</i>	41
2.4.3.6	<i>Snake charming as normal Canaanite practice</i>	42
2.5	SNAKE CULTS	43
2.5.1	Mesopotamia and Egypt	43
2.5.2	Syria-Palestine	43
2.5.2.1	<i>The unofficial snake cult</i>	43
2.5.2.2	<i>A Bronze Age cult</i>	44
2.5.2.3	<i>The serpent in the Temple</i>	44
2.5.2.4	<i>Moses and the serpent</i>	45
2.5.2.5	<i>Absence of serpent temples</i>	45
2.5.3	Positive perceptions	45
2.6	CONCLUSION	46

CHAPTER THREE

THE SERPENT IN CHAOS AND MISCHIEF

3.1	INTRODUCTION	48
3.1.1	Demons and hybrids	48
3.1.1.1	<i>Demons</i>	48
3.1.1.2	<i>Hybrids and serpent monsters</i>	49
3.2	VENOMOUS SNAKES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST	50
3.2.1	Venom	51
3.2.1.1	<i>Neurotoxic venom</i>	51
3.2.1.2	<i>Hemotoxic venom</i>	51
3.2.1.3	<i>Cytotoxic venom</i>	51
3.2.1.4	<i>Fear of venomous bites</i>	52
3.2.2	Venomous snakes	52
3.2.2.1	<i>Differentiating between various species of snakes</i>	52
3.2.2.2	<i>Viper versus cobra</i>	53
3.2.2.3	<i>Egyptian snakes and the Brooklyn Papyrus</i>	53
3.2.2.4	<i>Snake species in Iraq</i>	54
3.2.2.5	<i>Snake species in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel</i>	55

3.2.3	Identification of ancient Near Eastern Snakes	55
3.2.3.1	<i>Desert horned viper</i>	55
3.2.3.2	<i>Red spitting cobra</i>	56
3.2.3.3	<i>General vipers</i>	57
3.3	THE SERPENT AS A THREAT TO ORDER.....	57
3.3.1	Mesopotamia.....	58
3.3.1.1	<i>Tiamat</i>	58
3.3.1.2	<i>Tiamat's monsters</i>	60
3.3.2	Syria-Palestine	61
3.3.2.1	<i>Leviathan.....</i>	61
3.3.2.2	<i>Tannin</i>	63
3.3.2.3	<i>Rahab</i>	63
3.3.2.4	<i>Yam.....</i>	64
3.3.2.5	<i>Storms and serpent worship</i>	65
3.3.3	Egypt	65
3.3.3.1	<i>Apophis (Apep).....</i>	65
3.3.3.2	<i>The serpents of the underworld.....</i>	67
3.3.3.3	<i>The serpent aspect of Seth.....</i>	74
3.3.4	Comparison between the serpent monsters of Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt.....	75
3.4	THE SERPENT AS A THREAT TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	76
3.4.1	Mesopotamia.....	77
3.4.1.1	<i>Asag.....</i>	77
3.4.1.2	<i>Lamaštu.....</i>	78
3.4.1.3	<i>The seven evil spirits</i>	78
3.4.1.4	<i>The headache demons</i>	79
3.4.1.5	<i>Gilgamesh's snake</i>	79
3.4.1.6	<i>The Huluppu tree snake</i>	80
3.4.1.7	<i>Ištar</i>	80
3.4.1.8	<i>Išhara</i>	81
3.4.1.9	<i>Ištaran</i>	81
3.4.1.10	<i>Ea</i>	82
3.4.1.11	<i>Ningizzida.....</i>	82
3.4.1.12	<i>Nergal.....</i>	82

3.4.1.13	<i>Eriškigal</i>	83
3.4.2	Egypt	84
3.4.2.1	<i>In-dif and Djeser-tep</i>	84
3.4.3	Comparison between the serpents of mischief and ill-health in Mesopotamia and Egypt	84
3.5	CONCLUSION	86

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HEALING SERPENT

4.1	HEALING AND PROTECTION	88
4.2	HEALING SERPENTS IN MESOPOTAMIA.....	88
4.2.1	Ningizzida	89
4.2.1.1	The assimilation of Ningizzida with other deities	91
4.2.2	Ninazu	92
4.2.3	Tišpak	93
4.2.4	<i>Mušhuššu</i> and <i>Bašmu</i>	94
4.2.4.1	<i>The transfer of the Mušhuššu</i>	96
4.2.5	Pazuzu	96
4.2.6	Ea	96
4.2.7	Marduk	97
4.2.7.1	<i>Marduk as a healing deity</i>	98
4.2.8	Gula-Bau	98
4.2.8.1	<i>Unravelling Gula-Bau</i>	99
4.2.8.2	<i>Gula-Bau as a healing deity</i>	100
4.2.9	Šahan	101
4.2.10	Inanna and Ištar	101
4.2.10.1	<i>Inanna, Ištar and the caduceus</i>	101
4.2.10.2	<i>Inanna and further serpent associations</i>	102
4.2.11	Nergal	103
4.2.12	Damu	104
4.2.13	Healing serpent family trees	104
4.2.14	Comparison between the different Mesopotamian serpents of healing and well-being	105

4.3	HEALING SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT.....	107
4.3.1	Isis.....	107
4.3.1.1	<i>The healing abilities of Isis.....</i>	110
4.3.2	Selqet (Serqet, Selkis, Selket).....	111
4.3.3	Neith.....	111
4.3.4	Comparison between the different Egyptian serpents of healing and well-being.....	112
4.4	HEALING SERPENTS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE.....	113
4.4.1	Nehuštan.....	114
4.4.1.1	<i>The bronze serpent and Moses.....</i>	114
4.4.1.2	<i>The bronze serpent as a symbol of healing.....</i>	115
4.4.1.3	<i>The Mesopotamian influence.....</i>	116
4.4.1.4	<i>Egyptian influence.....</i>	117
4.4.1.5	<i>The Hazor figurine.....</i>	117
4.4.2	Ašerah.....	117
4.4.2.1	<i>Ašerah's serpent aspect.....</i>	117
4.4.2.2	<i>Epithets and alignment with other goddesses.....</i>	118
4.4.2.3	<i>Ašerah the pole.....</i>	118
4.4.3	Astarte.....	119
4.4.3.1	<i>Epithets and alignments of Astarte.....</i>	120
4.4.3.2	<i>Astarte's serpent links.....</i>	120
4.4.4	Athirat.....	120
4.4.5	Qudšu (Qetesh).....	121
4.4.5.1	<i>Qudšu, the holy one.....</i>	121
4.4.6	'Elat ('lt).....	122
4.4.6.1	<i>The Lachish Ewer.....</i>	122
4.4.7	The generic Canaanite goddess 'Elat.....	122
4.4.7.1	<i>'Elat and the serpent symbol.....</i>	124
4.4.8	Establishing the healing aspect of 'Elat.....	125
4.4.8.1	<i>The water lily.....</i>	125
4.4.9	'Elat, Eve and the Genesis serpent.....	128
4.4.9.1	<i>Etymological considerations.....</i>	128
4.4.9.2	<i>Linking Eve to 'Elat.....</i>	130
4.4.9.3	<i>Eve's serpent.....</i>	131

4.4.9.4	<i>Hvidberg's view on the identity of the Genesis serpent</i>	131
4.4.9.5	<i>Snake motif artefacts</i>	132
4.4.10	Išhara	132
4.4.11	Rešeph	133
4.4.12	Comparison between the Syro-Palestinian serpents of healing and well-being	134
4.5	CONCLUSION	135

CHAPTER FIVE

UTILISATION OF THE SERPENT IN HEALING

5.1	INTRODUCTION	138
5.2	HEALING VENOMOUS SNAKE BITES	140
5.2.1	Incantations	140
5.2.1.1	<i>Definition</i>	140
5.2.1.2	<i>Ugaritic texts</i>	140
5.2.1.3	<i>Mesopotamian incantations</i>	141
5.2.1.4	<i>A Sumerian incantation to seize a snake</i>	143
5.2.1.5	<i>Egyptian incantations</i>	143
5.2.1.6	<i>Spells and incantations contained in the New Kingdom Egyptian papyri</i>	144
5.2.1.7	<i>Anti-venom spell from the Chester-Beatty Papyrus</i>	146
5.2.1.8	<i>Prayer in Biblical times</i>	146
5.2.2	Invocations	147
5.2.2.1	<i>Definition</i>	147
5.2.2.2	<i>Ugaritic texts</i>	147
5.2.2.3	<i>Egyptian spells</i>	147
5.2.3	The use of mythology	147
5.2.3.1	<i>The myth of Isis and Re</i>	148
5.2.3.2	<i>Egyptian incantations incorporating mythology</i>	148
5.2.3.3	<i>The use of myth in the Brooklyn Papyrus</i>	149
5.2.4	Exorcism	149
5.2.4.1	<i>Using modern day Iraqi traditions as an analogy</i>	149
5.2.4.2	<i>Egyptian exorcisms in the Brooklyn Papyrus</i>	150
5.2.5	Amulet objects	151

5.2.5.1	<i>Cippi</i>	151
5.2.5.2	<i>Troughs</i>	152
5.2.5.3	<i>Stones</i>	152
5.2.6	The <i>Brooklyn Papyrus</i> and Egyptian concepts in healing snake bite	152
5.2.6.1	<i>Treatment scenarios</i>	152
5.2.6.2	<i>Internal and external treatment</i>	153
5.2.6.3	<i>Methods of external treatment</i>	154
	a. Wound dressing	154
	b. Applying of ointments	154
	c. Massage	154
	d. Debridement of the wound.....	154
	e. Fumigation	155
5.2.6.4	<i>Methods of internal treatment</i>	155
5.2.7	Medicinal ingredients, compounds and cures	155
5.2.7.1	<i>Mesopotamian compounds</i>	155
5.2.7.2	<i>Egyptian preparations from the <i>Brooklyn Papyrus</i></i>	157
5.2.7.3	<i>Egyptian wound cleansing and water</i>	168
5.2.7.4	<i>Syro-Palestinian compounds</i>	168
5.3	USE OF THE SNAKE IN HEALING	161
5.3.1	The serpent and water	161
5.3.2	Invocations	163
5.3.3	Incantations	164
5.3.3.1	<i>Mesopotamian incantations</i>	164
5.3.3.2	<i>Egyptian incantations</i>	165
5.3.4	The use of legends	165
5.3.4.1	<i>Legend in Mesopotamia</i>	165
5.3.4.2	<i>Legend in Egypt</i>	165
5.3.4.3	<i>A legend from Ugarit</i>	166
5.3.4.4	<i>Snake venom as a modern day cure</i>	166
5.3.5	Serpent artefacts	167
5.3.5.1	<i>Nehuštan</i>	167
5.3.5.2	<i>The ‘Ain Samiya cup</i>	167
5.3.5.3	<i>Egyptian serpent cases</i>	168
5.3.6	The staff	168

5.3.6.1	<i>The staff as a magician's tool of power</i>	168
5.3.6.2	<i>The magician's staff as a healing tool</i>	169
5.3.6.3	<i>A Mesopotamian staff</i>	169
5.3.6.4	<i>Staffs in Ugarit</i>	169
5.3.6.5	<i>The magician's staff from the Ramesseum</i>	169
5.3.6.6	<i>Further examples of Egyptian staffs</i>	170
5.3.6.7	<i>The Mount Karkom engraving</i>	171
5.3.7	Medicinal compounds	171
5.3.7.1	<i>Theriac</i>	171
5.3.7.2	<i>The link between wine and serpents</i>	174
5.3.7.3	<i>Reference to cooking serpents in the Pyramid Texts</i>	175
5.3.7.4	<i>Serpent parts in Mesopotamian prescriptions</i>	176
5.3.7.5	<i>Egyptian compounds with serpent ingredients</i>	177
5.3.7.6	<i>An Israelite prescription</i>	178
5.3.8	The stele as an amulet of healing	178
5.3.9	The healing temple and serpents	179
5.3.9.1	<i>An Egyptian serpent healing temple</i>	180
5.3.9.2	<i>Healing temples in Syria-Palestine</i>	180
5.3.9.3	<i>Healing temples in Mesopotamia</i>	181
5.4	CONCLUSION	181

CHAPTER SIX

THE PROTECTIVE SERPENT

6.1	PROTECTION	185
6.2	PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN MESOPOTAMIA	185
6.2.1	Ningizzida	185
6.2.2	<i>Mušhuššu</i> and <i>Bašmu</i>	186
6.2.3	Pazuzu	187
6.2.4	Tišpak	188
6.2.5	Ištar	188
6.2.6	Ištaran	188
6.2.6.1	<i>Portrayal of Ištaran</i>	189
6.2.6.2	<i>Facets of Ištaran</i>	189

6.2.6.3	<i>Ištaran and suffering</i>	190
6.2.7	Nirah	190
6.2.7.1	<i>Nirah and Irhan</i>	190
6.2.8	Irnina	190
6.2.9	Sirsir	191
6.2.10	Kišar	191
6.2.11	Sagan (Šerag)	191
6.2.12	Comparison between the Mesopotamian serpents of protection	192
6.3	PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT	193
6.3.1	Sito	193
6.3.1.1	<i>Sito as the ouroboros</i>	194
6.3.1.2	<i>Sito as the primordial serpent</i>	195
6.3.2	Wadjet (Uadjit, Buto, Edjo)	195
6.3.2.1	<i>The development of the uraeus</i>	196
6.3.3	Isis	197
6.3.4	Nephthys, Neith and Selqet	198
6.3.4.1	<i>Nephthys</i>	198
6.3.4.2	<i>Neith</i>	198
6.3.4.3	<i>Selqet</i>	198
6.3.5	Renenutet (Ernutet, Renenet) and Shay (Shai)	198
6.3.6	Meretseger	199
6.3.7	Nekhbet	200
6.3.8	Netjer-ankh	200
6.3.9	Kebehut	201
6.3.10	Nehebkhou	201
6.3.11	Weret-Hekau	201
6.3.12	Guardians of the underworld	202
6.3.12.1	<i>Seth</i>	202
6.3.12.2	<i>Mehen and Nehaher</i>	202
6.3.12.3	<i>Nehebkhou</i>	204
6.3.13	Comparison between the Egyptian serpents of protection	204
6.4	PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE.....	205
6.4.1	The seraphim	205
6.4.1.1	<i>The Hebrew use of the word ‘saraph’</i>	206

6.4.1.2	<i>The flying serpent</i>	206
6.4.1.3	<i>Seref and šarrāpu</i>	207
6.4.1.4	<i>The Egyptian influence on the seraphim</i>	207
6.5	CONCLUSION	210

CHAPTER SEVEN

UTILISATION OF THE SERPENT IN PROTECTION

7.1	INTRODUCTION	212
7.2	PROTECTION AGAINST THE SERPENT	212
7.2.1	Incantations	213
7.2.1.1	<i>Ugaritic serpent charm RS 24.244</i>	213
7.2.1.2	<i>Further Ugaritic incantations</i>	214
7.2.1.3	<i>Mesopotamian incantations</i>	214
7.2.1.4	<i>Mesopotamian incantation to repel Lamaštu</i>	215
7.2.1.5	<i>Further Mesopotamian incantations</i>	215
7.2.1.6	<i>A Namburbi incantation</i>	215
7.2.1.7	<i>Possible Israelite charms</i>	216
7.2.1.8	<i>An Egyptian book</i>	217
7.2.2	Magic spells	217
7.2.2.1	<i>An Egyptian protection of the house</i>	217
7.2.2.2	<i>Turin Papyrus 54003</i>	217
7.2.2.3	<i>Further examples of Egyptian spells to protect the individual</i>	219
7.2.3	Egyptian mortuary texts, spells and vignettes	219
7.2.3.1	<i>Snakes as a threat to the deceased</i>	219
7.2.3.2	<i>The Book of overthrowing Apep</i>	221
7.2.3.3	<i>Spells from the Pyramid Texts</i>	221
7.2.3.4	<i>The Hiw-serpent</i>	222
7.2.3.5	<i>Methods of slaying the demon underworld serpents</i>	222
7.2.3.6	<i>A protective spell against Apophis</i>	223
7.2.3.7	<i>Canaanite influence on the pyramid snake spells</i>	223
7.2.4	Special artefacts of protection	224
7.2.4.1	<i>Egyptian ivory wands</i>	224
7.2.4.2	<i>Nehebkhou amulets</i>	224

7.2.4.3	<i>The Upwawet statuette</i>	225
7.2.4.4	<i>Snake figurine from Cave IS IV</i>	225
7.2.4.5	<i>The Nami and Beth Shan suspension pendants</i>	225
7.2.4.6	<i>The Amarna serpent pendants</i>	226
7.2.4.7	<i>Snake-head amulets</i>	226
7.2.4.8	<i>Lion amulets</i>	227
7.2.4.9	<i>Cippi</i>	227
7.2.4.10	<i>Protective livestock amulets</i>	228
7.2.4.11	<i>Wooden Horus amulets</i>	228
7.2.4.12	<i>Bes amulets</i>	228
7.2.4.13	<i>An Egyptian medicinal charm</i>	228
7.2.4.14	<i>A protective statue of Ramesses III</i>	229
7.2.5	Protective serpent boats	229
7.2.5.1	<i>Egyptian underworld boats</i>	229
7.2.6	Burial amulets	230
7.2.6.1	<i>The serpent game</i>	230
7.2.6.2	<i>Snake-headed amulets</i>	231
7.2.6.3	<i>The Book of the Dead</i>	232
7.2.7	Egyptian underworld iconography	232
7.2.7.1	<i>The Book of Pylons</i>	232
7.2.7.2	<i>The Book of that which is in the underworld</i>	233
7.2.8	Protective animal images and texts	235
7.2.8.1	<i>The cat</i>	235
7.2.8.2	<i>The ibis</i>	236
7.2.8.3	<i>The ichneumon</i>	236
7.2.9	Ritual activities	237
7.2.9.1	<i>Burning of wax effigies</i>	237
7.2.9.2	<i>Mixing of protective remedies</i>	237
7.2.9.3	<i>A Namburbu ritual</i>	238
7.2.9.4	<i>A ritual fire</i>	238
7.2.10	Myths and legends	239
7.2.10.1	<i>The Tablet of Destinies, herbs and the red stone</i>	239
7.3	THE SERPENT AS A FORM OF PROTECTION	239
7.3.1	Specific artefacts of protection	240

7.3.1.1	<i>Sun disc and uraeus cobra amulets</i>	240
7.3.1.2	<i>Serpent with arms amulets</i>	241
7.3.1.3	<i>Serpent stones</i>	241
7.3.1.4	<i>Deity figurines with uraeus cobras</i>	241
7.3.1.5	<i>Serpent standards in Egypt and Syria-Palestine</i>	242
7.3.1.6	<i>Mesopotamian votive seals</i>	242
7.3.1.7	<i>Mesopotamian boundary stones (kudurrus)</i>	243
7.3.1.8	<i>Egyptian clay cobras and magic spells</i>	244
7.3.1.9	<i>The Gardiner Ostrakon</i>	245
7.3.1.10	<i>A royal sword from Byblos</i>	246
7.3.2	The serpent staff as a form of protection	246
7.3.3	Jewellery	248
7.3.3.1	<i>An Egyptian child's band</i>	248
7.3.3.2	<i>Weret-hekau pendant</i>	249
7.3.4	Myths and legends	249
7.3.4.1	<i>The legend of the destruction of humankind</i>	249
7.3.4.2	<i>Kishar, the boundary serpent</i>	249
7.3.5	Protection of places	250
7.3.5.1	<i>Early Egyptian temples</i>	250
7.3.5.2	<i>Mesopotamian temples</i>	250
7.3.5.3	<i>Gate guardians of the Egyptian underworld</i>	250
7.3.5.4	<i>Mesopotamian house amulets</i>	251
7.3.5.5	<i>Egyptian serpent nome</i>	252
7.3.5.6	<i>Syro-Palestinian 'snake houses' and temple protectors</i>	251
7.3.5.7	<i>Protector of the tribes of Israel</i>	253
7.3.5.8	<i>The cobra frieze</i>	253
7.3.5.9	<i>Protective granary amulets</i>	254
7.3.6	Protective serpent boat imagery	254
7.3.7	Burial amulets	254
7.3.7.1	<i>Netjer-ankh amulets</i>	255
7.3.7.2	<i>Cobra goddess for the head</i>	255
7.3.7.3	<i>Wadjet and Nekhbet amulets</i>	256
7.3.7.4	<i>Spell and ritual from the 'Book of the Heavenly Cow'</i>	256
7.3.7.5	<i>A tomb curse</i>	256

7.3.8	Spells and incantations: the Pyramid Texts	256
7.3.8.1	<i>The protective uraeus crown in the Pyramid Texts.....</i>	257
7.3.9	Serpent vessels	258
7.4	CONCLUSION	259
7.4.1	Protection against the serpent.....	259
7.4.1.1	<i>The written word</i>	259
7.4.1.2	<i>Egyptian burial protection</i>	260
7.4.1.3	<i>Protective artefacts</i>	260
7.4.2	Using the serpent as an agent of protection	260
7.4.2.1	<i>Protective items.....</i>	260
7.4.2.2	<i>Jewellery</i>	260
7.4.2.3	<i>Protection of places</i>	260

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

8.1	MAGIC	262
8.1.1	Magic and amulets	262
8.1.2	Serpent personnel.....	262
8.2	FEAR OF THE SNAKE	263
8.2.1	The snake as a threat to order and life.....	264
8.2.2	The snake as a threat to health	264
8.3	POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS	265
8.3.1	The healing serpent	265
8.4	THE ROLE OF THE SERPENT IN HEALING	267
8.5	PROTECTIVE SERPENT DEITIES	269
8.6	THE ROLE OF THE SERPENT IN PROTECTIVE DEVICES.....	270
8.7	IN CONCLUSION.....	271
	REFERENCES	273

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER THREE

Figure 1: Elamite priest with snakes.....	53
Figure 2: Arabian horned vipers	56
Figure 3: Mušhuššu dragon from the Ištar Gate	56
Figure 4: Gold and semi-precious stone cobra from tomb of Senwosret II	56
Figure 5: Juvenile Red spitting cobra	57
Figure 6: Scene from the ‘Ain-Samiya cup	60
Figure 7: The seven-headed monster, Mušmahhu	61
Figure 8: The <i>Williams cylinder</i>	63
Figure 9: The serpent barque	69
Figure 10: Multi-headed and winged serpents	69
Figure 11: Serpent giving rise to heads of the four Sons of Horus	70
Figure 12: Upper register: The protection of Afu by Mehen. Lower register: The slaying of Nehaher by the scorpion goddess.....	70
Figure 13: Serpents bearing the crowns	71
Figure 14: Seti over the funerary shrines.....	72
Figure 15: The fire-breathing serpent Kheti	72
Figure 16: Semi and the serpent with human bodies.....	73
Figure 17: Uamemtiu restrained by Geb and the Four Sons of Horus	73
Figure 18: Apophis/Apep hieroglyph	74
Figure 19: Rerek hieroglyph.....	74
Figure 20: Lamaštu demon holding snakes	78
Figure 21: The Cat of Heliopolis slaying the serpent Apophis	84
Figure 22: The Great Cat slaying Apophis	84

CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 23: Ningizzida leading Gudea to Enki	90
Figure 24: Ningizzida on Akkadian seal	91
Figure 25: Libation cup of Gudea.....	91
Figure 26: Caduceus emblem	91

Figure 27: Arabian horned viper	94
Figure 28: Deities flanked by serpent, cylinder seal c2500 BCE, Iran	99
Figure 29: Ištar (right) and the caduceus	101
Figure 30: Inanna holding the caduceus	101
Figure 31: The <i>muš</i> glyph	102
Figure 32: Isis suckling infant	108
Figure 33: Renenutet suckling infant.....	108
Figure 34: Isis with serpents on 1 st century BCE Egyptian coin	108
Figure 35: Serpent-headed Madonna from Ur.....	109
Figure 36: Neith in her cobra form	112
Figure 37: Asclepius and his serpent staff.....	116
Figure 38: Various types of ašerah columns	119
Figure 39: The naked goddess with snake and water lily.....	124
Figure 40: Worship of Qudšu, accompanied by Min and Rešeph.....	125
Figure 41: The offering of mandrake fruits and a water lily bud to Semenkhhara	125
Figure 42: The goddess Wadjet with water lily and serpent sceptre	127

CHAPTER FIVE

Figure 43: The god Amun with his serpent staff	170
Figure 44: Ptah with serpent staffs	170
Figure 45: The cobra goddess Nekhebet with her serpent staff.....	171
Figure 46: Offering to Renenutet.....	175

CHAPTER SIX

Figure 47: Sito as a serpent on two legs	194
Figure 48: The protective ouroboros	194
Figure 49: The uraeus cobra on the headdress of the pharaoh	196
Figure 50: Isis and Nephthys in serpent form.....	197
Figure 51: Column, Temple of Hathor, Denderah.....	197
Figure 52: Column, mortuary temple of Ramses II.....	197
Figure 53: Osiris on the mound of Nun	203
Figure 54: Underworld serpents	203
Figure 55: Tutankhamun's gilded throne	208
Figure 56: Winged uraeus amulet with human features	208

Figure 57: Winged uraeus.....	209
Figure 58: Winged serpent	209

CHAPTER SEVEN

Figure 59: Ivory wand with snake motifs.....	224
Figure 60: Nehebkhou amulet.....	225
Figure 61: The Amarna serpent pendants.....	226
Figure 62: Underworld serpent boat, the boat of Nepr.....	229
Figure 63: Re in his serpent boat	229
Figure 64: Re in his serpent boat	230
Figure 65a: The serpent game board	231
Figure 65b: The serpent game board	231
Figure 66: Snake head amulet	231
Figure 67: The scarab and sun disc surrounded by a serpent	232
Figure 68: Serpent boat with crowned serpents.....	233
Figure 69: Kudurru of Ritti-Marduk.....	244
Figure 70: The <i>mušhuššu</i> dragon on the kudurru of Ritti-Marduk.....	244
Figure 71: Protective figures with serpent staffs in the First Hour of the night.....	247
Figure 72: Serpent staff behind deity	247
Figure 73: Serpent staffs and protective figures	247
Figure 74: Falcon deity with serpent staff	248
Figure 75: Serpent gate guardian.....	251
Figure 76: Cobra frieze, Temple of Isis, Agilkia Island in Aswan.....	253
Figure 77: Selqet in her serpent boat	254
Figure 78: Beaded cobras on the head of Tutankhamun's mummy	255

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER TWO

Table 1: Inclusion of serpent names among the Levites	40
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CHAPTER THREE

Table 2: The serpents of chaos	75
Table 3: The serpents of mischief and ill-health	84

CHAPTER FOUR

Table 4: Diagram to illustrate transfer of the <i>mušhuššu</i>	96
Table 5: Diagrams to illustrate serpent family trees	104
Table 6: The Mesopotamian serpents of healing	105
Table 7: The Egyptian serpents of healing	112
Table 8: Similarities between Ašerah, Astarte, Athirat and Qudšu.	123
Table 9: Illustration of Semitic roots of ‘serpent’ and ‘life’	129
Table 10: The Syro-Palestinian serpents of healing.....	134

CHAPTER FIVE

Table 11: Babylonian antidotes for snake-bite venom.....	156
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CHAPTER SIX

Table 12: Protective Mesopotamian serpents.....	192
Table 13: The Egyptian serpents of protection	204

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The serpent has had a place in ancient belief systems on a global level for a very long time. Animism arose from the belief that creatures have a soul. The theory of animism developed by Tylor further stated that the soul or spirit could continue after death and that the spirit could become deified (Herskovits 1966:210). Active worship was a human reaction to this. The attribution of a life force to inanimate objects was labelled 'animatism' by Marett (as cited in Herskovits 1966:211) This concept would apply to the inanimate forces of nature (Herskovits 1966:211). Ancient man evolved in an environment where the most sensible way to explain this environment that caused awe, wonder and fear was to apply human intelligence to it. Animism and animatism gave rise to fetishism, cults and beliefs in magic. Through reading texts such as mythologies and observing ancient Near Eastern art, one can clearly see that human emotions and characteristics were applied to these forces and spirits over time, giving rise to anthropomorphism. However, even with human emotions applied, many spirits remained in animal form. An example of this is the serpent which appeared in abundance in the literature, art and religion of the ancient Near East. Some serpents remained as snakes whilst others were deified. Some deities had serpent aspects to them but were not necessarily serpent deities. Other deities had associations with serpents and in a number of instances the serpent was the symbol of particular deities. There were also serpents that did not become a deity but rather a demon, representing a bad spirit, or a genius, the good spirit.

The manner in which ancient man perceived the serpent manifest in various ways. These manifestations are linked to belief systems which are primarily religious. As a result information regarding serpents and serpent cults in the ancient Near East comes from a wide variety of primary sources. These sources include mythologies, spells, invocations, incantations and prayers, the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts, iconography, amulets, ceramic ware, murals and jewellery. Evidence is therefore both textual and artefactual as beliefs revealed themselves in the material culture.

In addition to being deified and demonised the serpent was even hybridised resulting in fantastical creatures such as dragons. The snake has been worshipped culminating in ophiolatory, and it has been feared. The serpent is a creature of opposites. The people of the ancient Near East perceived the serpent in a number of different ways. Accordingly the serpent filled several roles. Some of these had negative connotations such as instigator of chaos or mischief. Other roles had positive connotations such as symbol or representative of life, rejuvenation, healing, wisdom, eternity and fertility.

To my mind there is no doubt that ophidiophobia plays a role in ophiolatory, as detailed by Mundkur in *The cult of the serpent*. Nevertheless I believe that there are other aspects to serpent worship even if the original basis is fear. It is the fear of the snake's bite and the effect of the venom that arouses man's terror. However, fear factor put aside, there are aspects of the snake's biological make-up that attract attention - such as its silent stealthy form of movement, flickering tongue and scaly body and ability to shed its skin. Some of these factors combined with the reputation of venomous snakes have led to the serpent, venomous and non-venomous alike, being cast in the role of villain and representative of chaos, cunning and evil in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine.

However, if cultures approached the inclusion of the serpent into their belief systems purely out of fear then we would expect to find only demonised serpents. These clearly do exist in the ancient Near East but there is an overwhelming amount of serpent deities and deities with ophidian aspects or associations that have positive connotations. These include links to the life force, rejuvenation, healing and protection. Snakes are not entirely aggressive creatures and many, given the opportunity, will slither away thereby exhibiting the shy side of their nature. Many will only attack when cornered or surprised. These positive connotations are surely based on ancient observation of the creature and cognisance of certain characteristics that have enabled ancient man to arrive at these perceptions. For example observation of the snake's ability to shed its skin to reveal a shiny new exterior has rendered it a symbol of rejuvenation. Some of these positive connotations may have their roots in fear of the snake but in numerous instances these negative perceptions have developed into positive perceptions by other human emotions such as awe and fascination. This is illustrated in the magnificent gold cobra with semi-precious stone inlays that was

crafted as part of the regalia of Egyptian king Senwosret II (Silverman [ed] 1997: 29). Surely the mind behind the hands that created this piece felt something other than fear? The piece is crafted with colour and attention to detail that transforms the cobra into a magnificent creature. The artist saw something other than an evil, cunning snake.

We cannot impose our modern day beliefs and views regarding snakes on the minds of ancient man. We are far removed in time and cannot assume that our views are identical. Whilst we may never gain an entirely accurate view we can try to piece the picture together based on the textual and artefactual evidence that has survived. Each culture has its reasons for choosing the serpent to represent various beliefs and to fulfil various functions. In some cultures these reasons may be similar; in others they will be entirely different. The snake has been chosen to represent various concepts such as chaos, protection, healing, life, wisdom and eternity.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

1.2.1 Research problem

What role did the ancient Near Eastern serpent play in apotropaic and prophylactic magic within the realms of healing and protection?

The serpent was very much considered to be a representative of healing and protection and so it might have played an important role in apotropaic and prophylactic magic. It may be that the serpent played both positive and negative roles within this sphere and I will investigate this possibility.

Information regarding ophiolatory and snakes in the ancient Near East is widely scattered in numerous works. Many scholars include a few lines, occasionally a few paragraphs on the serpent in their work. Often this mention is in passing and is not necessarily the focus of the work or article. One has to consult many literary sources in order to get an understanding of the various ophidian deities and serpents.

Serpent creatures and deities abounded in the ancient Near East. They were much more prevalent than a first glance leads us to believe. The cult of the serpent was alive and well and a very important aspect of religion and daily life. There are serpent deities that are seemingly obscure that I feel have been neglected due to the focus of scholars on the major religions and the cosmological and chief deities in the various pantheons.

The serpent was perceived in a number of different ways in the ancient Near East. These varied perceptions resulted in the serpent fulfilling a variety of different functions in ancient Near Eastern belief systems and culture. The roles filled by the serpent could vary from one region to the next and accordingly there are similarities and differences in the cultural perceptions. For example, the serpent is portrayed as a creature of chaos and an instigator of sin in the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis. I believe that the serpent was so much more than this and this particular role is only one of several.

1.3 HYPOTHESIS

A comparative study may illuminate the positive and negative roles played by the serpent through the study of examples of art, artefacts and texts pertaining to religious and superstitious beliefs, and show that the serpent indeed filled a positive role that rivalled the role of troublecauser. These perspectives might best be seen through the role of the serpent in apotropaic and prophylactic magic, which was an important part of everyday life.

Results of such comparison may provide information on how aspects of a culture were perceived and may provide scope for a further study at some point. An example would be an understanding that we may gain on the Egyptian concept of the underworld versus the Mesopotamian concept purely through what we learn about their attitudes towards the serpent.

Lastly the study itself might help to change our preconceived ideas of the snake as a purely evil and cunning creature, and that we are able to catch a glimpse of this magnificent creature through the eyes of the ancient Near Easterner.

1.4 AIMS OF STUDY

The *primary aim* of this dissertation is to do a comparative study of the serpent deities, deities with serpent aspects and associations and the non-deified snake in order to show that the serpent filled a positive role through its use as a representative of protection and healing in opposition to its role as a creature of chaos and misfortune. Its role, both positive and negative, in this regard will be explored.

In order to narrow down the field of study, the *focus* of this study will be on the serpents that fulfil the function of protection and healing versus the serpents that function as instigators of chaos and mischief. I have chosen these seemingly opposite roles as one cannot function without the other.

Because I have noticed that serpents, serpent deities and those with ophidian aspects and associations can be grouped according to function, I have devised a framework based on the functional groups. My objective is to use this framework as a basis from which I derive certain information. The framework takes the form of tables in which I have categorised the serpents and deities that are relevant to this study. These tables are limited to the serpent deities, deities with serpent aspects and associations and the non-deified snake associated with healing, protection and chaos.

My objective will further be to examine these serpents on an intra- and inter-regional basis in order to establish trends, similarities and differences in perceptions within a region and then between regions. These regions are Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia. It may then be possible to establish what characteristics have passed as influence from one region to another and what has been established independently. As this is a comparative study I feel that it is necessary to compare the specified role across the ancient Near East rather than limit it to one region.

Another aim of this study is to rescue some of these lesser known serpent deities from obscurity and bring them back to life. In addition, this investigation will hopefully draw attention to a number of the better-known deities that have serpent aspects or associations that are often glossed over. This study will explore the possibility, within

the realm of apotropaic and prophylactic magic, that a number of important ancient Near Eastern deities had ophidian aspects.

1.5 A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

A wide selection of books and journal articles has been consulted. Thus far I have not encountered any study that specifically focuses on comparing the roles of the serpent in the ancient Near East, or that focuses on comparing the protective, healing and chaos-causing roles, or the snake's role in magic.

The information has been drawn mainly from primary and secondary sources such as books and articles. Internet resources have occasionally been used. The information covers archaeological finds, mythologies and other textual information translated from ancient Near Eastern sources such as clay tablets, papyri and other sources of inscriptions found in tombs and temples, for example. Therefore literary, artefactual and iconographical sources have been examined

1.5.1 Primary sources

Primary sources of information utilised are those containing transcriptions of ancient texts. These texts are inclusive of invocations, incantations and spells. Some of these were originally found in the form of *cuneiform tablets* in the case of Mesopotamian texts, and in *papyri* and *tomb wall inscriptions* in the case of the ancient Egyptians. Canaanite textual material is more difficult to come by. I have utilised information from transcriptions of the *Ugarit texts* and also from *Genesis* and *Numbers* in the Hebrew Bible. I have used the primary sources to gain information on the involvement of the snake in healing and protection.

I have found Budge's volume of *The Egyptian book of the dead* (1967) useful for transcriptions of the Pyramid Texts and descriptions of vignettes that may accompany the texts on tomb walls as well as spells and utterances mentioned in Faulkner's *The ancient Egyptian pyramid texts* (1969).

Transcriptions of ancient Egyptian papyri are helpful. For information on healing snake bite in ancient Egypt I have used Sauneron's *Un traité Égyptien d'ophiologie* (1989) which draws from the *Brooklyn Papyri* numbers 47.218.48 and 47.218.85. Leitz (1999) includes transcriptions of snake bite incantations from papyri BM EA 9997, 10309, 10085 and 10105 which are housed in the British Museum. An anti-snake spell in the *Turin Papyrus* presented by Waraska (2009) has also been consulted.

For transcriptions of the Ugaritic texts containing snake bite incantations I have turned to Spronk (1999), Watson & Wyatt (1999), and Astour (1968). Transcriptions of incantations and invocations from Mesopotamian I have looked at Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985) and Thompson (1903 and 1904).

I have searched books for illustrations of artefacts with serpent motifs. In some cases descriptions have had to suffice, for instance with regards to the bronze serpent Nehuštān I have had to rely on the description in Numbers in the Bible.

1.5.2 Secondary sources

Much valuable information regarding serpents in ancient Egypt has been obtained from the works of Budge. Many later scholars include numerous references to his work suggesting that it is held in high regard. In *Gods of the Egyptians* (1969, 2 volumes) he includes information on serpents that is hard to find in such detail elsewhere. This work in conjunction with his *The Egyptian book of the dead* (1967) provides in depth information on snakes in the Egyptian underworld. Budge's *Amulets and superstitions* (1978) has been useful in accessing information regarding the role of the snake in the realm of magic in Egyptian life. Both Budge's *From fetish to god in ancient Egypt* (1972) and Breasted's *Development of religion and thought in ancient Egypt* (1959) give a good background to the development of religion in ancient Egypt and have provided an understanding of how the serpent fits into this. *The essential guide to Egyptian mythology* (Redford [ed] 2003) supplies useful information on snakes in the Egyptian pantheons and in religion and magic. Basic information on the serpent deities and the serpent in the mythology of Mesopotamia is derived from standard works such as *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Dalley 2000), A

Dictionary of Near Eastern mythology (Leick 1998), *Sumerian gods and their representations* (Finkel & Geller [eds] 1997), and *Gods, demons and symbols of ancient Mesopotamia* (Black & Green 2008).

The appearance of the snake in the art of the ancient Near East is covered in general art books such as *Ancient Near Eastern art* (Amiet 1980) and *Art in the ancient world: a hand book of styles and forms* (Amiet et al 1981). The more well-known pieces with serpent motifs can be found in reference books such as these. *The many faces of the goddess: the iconography of the Syro-Palestinian goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c 1500-1000 BCE* (Cornelius 2004) covers the iconography of these goddesses in Syria-Palestine. Numerous plaques, pendants and steles bear the image of a naked goddess with arms outstretched. Often in each hand she holds lotus blooms, lilies or serpents. It is often not clear which of the Syro-Palestinian goddesses is being depicted, but whoever she is she has a link with serpents.

The appearance of the snake in ancient Near Eastern artefacts is dealt with on a much more specific level by Koh¹ and McDonald in their unpublished PhD theses. Both theses have provided much valuable insight into the role played by the serpent. *An archaeological investigation of the snake cult of the southern Levant: the Chalcolithic through the Iron Age* (Koh 1994) discusses some of the literary evidence for the snake cult in the southern Levant. However the focus of the thesis is regarding what is revealed by the archaeological evidence. The thesis provides detailed archaeological evidence of a snake cult from the region. Koh gives an iconographical analysis of the southern Levantine snake symbol, the development of the snake cult from early beginnings in the Chalcolithic through the Bronze Age and its demise in the Iron Age. In McDonald's 1989 PhD thesis *Serpent imagery on ancient Near Eastern pottery* she investigates the appearance of serpent images found on pottery, statues and other artefacts from Mesopotamia, Palestine and Iran. She provides a catalogue of pottery items bearing serpent imagery and also an analysis of the catalogued items. The

¹ Koh's PhD dissertation (1994) gives a detailed inventory of Bronze and Iron Age artefacts relating to the serpent that were found in the southern Levant.

analysis reveals that the serpent image was linked to ideas on rejuvenation and healing. McDonald includes a discussion on the use of the snake in healing.

There are two additional studies that focus on serpent symbolism in the region of Syria-Palestine. In *Serpent symbolism in the Old Testament: a linguistic, archaeological and literary study* (1938) Randolph Joines discusses the serpent symbol as it appears in the Old Testament. Her work covers in detail the serpent of the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis, the serpent and Isaiah, the serpent associated with Moses and the role of the bronze serpent in Israel's cult. Randolph Joines includes a study on terminology that has been used to describe the serpent in the Old Testament. She concludes that the serpent was used to symbolise wisdom, chaos, life and death. The Mesopotamian, Hyksos, Canaanite and Egyptian influences on the Israelite serpent symbol are acknowledged.² The more recent of the studies on serpent symbolism in the region is Wilson's *The serpent symbol in the ancient Near East. Nahash and Asherah: death, life and healing* (2001). This was originally his doctoral dissertation. Wilson's aim is to establish the cultural and historical role of the serpent in Israel's cult. He draws on literary and iconographical evidence. Both Nehuštān and Asherah play an important role in the discussion. The relevance of the serpent in relation to life, death and healing cults is examined. Evidence is drawn from biblical and extra-biblical sources.

In *The cult of the serpent* (1983) Mundkur deals with the manifestations and origins of serpent cults on a global level. According to Mundkur (1983:xvi) serpent veneration is one of the earliest forms of animal worship. He inspects serpent veneration and its origins from a cross-cultural, global point of view. This worship is examined from a psychoanalytical perspective which Mundkur feels is primarily rooted in fear (Mundkur 1983:6). This fear, he believes, stems from the developmental memory of the human species regarding snake venom. This work is delivered mainly from the perspective of human behaviour and its reactions to the biological makeup of the snake.

² The Hyksos appear to have been a Semitic speaking people that originated in Syria-Palestine. Their name indicates they were 'shepherd kings' or 'foreign rulers'. The Hyksos were the 15th to 17th Dynasty rulers of Egypt before their expulsion by Ahmose I in approximately 1535 BCE (Hoerth, Mattingly & Yamauchi [eds]. 1994:270-271).

1.6 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.6.1 Research design and approach

This investigation is a comparative study based largely on analysing existing information. More specifically this can be considered as an archaeological and historical approach due to the nature of the sources that have been used.

1.6.1.1 Theoretical framework

The framework along which the study has been examined is created as follows. The serpents have been placed in groups according to the information that is gathered.

- i) Chaotic serpents and mischief makers
- ii) Healing serpents
- iii) Protective serpents

1.6.1.2 System of tables

I have developed a system of tables in order to facilitate the interpretation of information that I have compiled. These tables allowed me to examine the information according to region, gender of deity or serpent, its type or its function. They are included in Chapters Three, Four and Six. From these tables certain facts became apparent. Each table has a key indicating region, gender and status of the serpent, along with columns for any other relevant information. ‘Status’ of the serpent refers to whether it is a snake, deified serpent, or a deity with serpent aspects or associations.

1.6.1.3 Cross-cultural and interregional study

The proposed dissertation is a comparative cross-cultural and interregional study. The study will examine the healing, protective and chaotic serpents of the ancient Near East from a literary and archaeological perspective. The written word which encompasses mythologies, prayers, incantations, spells and various other inscriptions along with archaeological finds which incorporate serpent motifs complement each other. This assists in obtaining a more balanced perspective.

1.6.2 Delimitations and limitations of the study

1.6.2.1 Delimitations

This study focuses on the way in which the serpent was perceived by the people of the ancient Near East with regards to protection, healing and chaos. These roles assigned to the serpent are examined on a cross-cultural level as this is a comparative study. The regions covered are ancient Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia. I feel that it is important to conduct the study across all three regions as it allows a holistic perspective rather than an isolated view. Furthermore influences tended to filter from one region to the next. The study should be able to follow this flow of influences.

The study focuses on the Bronze Age (3300-1200 BCE)³ and I have incorporated Iron Age I (1200-1000 BCE).⁴ I have included Iron Age I as it is a transition period and much of its material culture is similar to that of the Late Bronze Age. This pertains to the Syria-Palestine region. This time frame translates to the Early Dynastic Period through to the end of the New Kingdom Period in ancient Egypt. The corresponding time frame in Mesopotamia runs from the Uruk IV period until end of the Middle Babylonian period in southern Mesopotamia and the end of the Middle Assyrian period in northern Mesopotamia.

1.6.2.2 Limitations

What we know about the ancient Near East is largely based on what has been discovered and excavated thus far. There are numerous sites that have only been partially excavated and an untold number of archaeological sites that have yet to be excavated let alone discovered. There are therefore gaps in our knowledge of the ancient Near East. Many answers to our questions are not concrete and we must be prepared to adapt our ideas as new information comes to light. As a result some of the information that I have used, has by its very nature, certain limitations. Conclusions that I draw regarding similarities and differences on the perceptions of the serpent between the various cultures (as they pertain to apotropaic and prophylactic magic) may be speculative as they are based on existing information.

³ I am using chronology according to Mazar (1992:30) for the Bronze Age.

⁴ I am using G. E. Wright's chronology cited in Mazar (1992:30) for Iron Age I.

Anatolia has not been included as I found the amount of information available regarding the serpent in that region to be minimal. This means that it was not possible to get a good general impression of how the serpent was perceived in Anatolia. Including it in a comparison with other regions will not give a true reflection on how the Anatolian view of the serpent may have differed or been similar to the serpents of the other regions.

1.6.3 Structure of the dissertation and outline of chapters

Deities often fulfil more than one function and so accordingly some would fall into more than one functional group. The most sensible approach therefore is to place each serpent in its primary function category in terms of protection, healing or causer of chaos. Mention will be made of the additional roles that it plays. The body of the dissertation is therefore divided into chapters based on the functions of the serpent. Each chapter will be concluded with observations on the key similarities and differences between the serpents within each region and between the regions.

Chapter Two - Magic in the Ancient Near East:

It is important to be able to place the role of the serpent in the context of the bigger picture of magic and related beliefs in the ancient Near East. Accordingly this chapter provides a preamble to the role played by the serpent in this important aspect of daily life of the ancient Near Easterner - it explains the use of amulets, prayers, spells and incantations. In ancient Egypt many spells were included in texts in tombs to ward off the evil serpents that densely populated the Am Duat or underworld. Amulets and prayers served to appease serpent deities in an attempt to minimise the often fatal effects of snake bite and also to prevent their occurrence. These media were also used to hold evil spirits at bay that often appeared in serpent form. Apotropaic magic required dedicated personnel which included priests, incantation specialists, healers, diviners, omen interpreters and snake charmers. Accordingly magic practitioners and snake handlers are discussed. Mention is also made of snake cults.

Chapter Three - The serpent in chaos and mischief:

This chapter discusses the negative role fulfilled by the serpent. I have included a discussion on venom and venomous snakes in order to facilitate the reader's

understanding as to why the snake occupied a villainous role. The nature and reputation of the snake as a creature of cunning intent naturally cast it in the role of evil doer, causer of chaos and instigator of mischief. This serpent is the opposite of the healing, protective serpent. Serpents in ancient Egypt posed an enormous threat to the deceased. It was feared that they would devour the dead. Serpents could represent the chaotic universe or threaten life itself. Important deities of chaos and mischief are discussed in this chapter. These include the Egyptian serpent Apophis, peril of the Am Duat; and the snake of the Gilgamesh epic that steals the plant of rejuvenation from the epic's hero. The Syro-Palestinian serpent monsters of the ocean such as Leviathan, Yam and Rehab make an appearance in this chapter as they provide a threat to ordered creation. The Mesopotamian Tiamat also falls into this category but by and large these chaotic serpent monsters of the deep appear to be a Levantine phenomenon. It is possible they are influenced by the Mesopotamian example. It is important to realise the depth of anxiety held by the Egyptians regarding the serpents of the underworld such as Apophis and his ophidian hoard. An explanation of the Egyptian underworld is included as a subsection. It is explained from the perspective of the sun god Re on his nightly journey through the Am Duat. This explanation will highlight the myriad of evil snakes present in the underworld. The vast majority of Egyptian chaotic serpents are chthonic. A vast amount of apotropaic and prophylactic magic was used against these chaotic and mischievous serpents. The tables that I have devised first make their appearance in Chapter Three in order to aid comparisons between the chaotic and mischievous serpents.

Chapter Four - The healing serpent:

Chapter Four focuses on a number of serpents, serpent deities and deities with serpent aspects and associations that were linked to healing and health. All the important deities linked to healing in each region are discussed, as well as those whose serpent links are not well known. These deities were often included in invocations and incantations for healing, or had shrines and steles dedicated to them. The tables that I devised have been used in this chapter in order to facilitate comparisons between the deities in each region and then between the regions.

Chapter Five - Utilisation of the serpent in healing:

This chapter examines how the serpent appears within the realm of healing. There are two distinct categories. Firstly I have looked at how snake bites were treated within the sphere of apotropaic magic. This incorporates invocations, incantations, the use of mythology and exorcism. Specific amulets could be employed, as well as medicinal cures. Secondly I have investigated how the serpent was used in healing. This does not include healing snake bites which I have included in the first part of the chapter. The serpent could be called upon to aid healing. Snake parts were used in medicinal cures. The link between the healing serpent and water is looked at, as well as the possible role played by certain temples. Artefacts such as stelae and magicians' staffs have also been discussed.

Chapter Six - The protective serpent:

This serpent provided a symbol of protection. It could protect a deity, living person or the deceased. It could also protect a temple, city or the underworld. Accordingly this chapter will differentiate between the serpent as protector of person and the guardian of place. It provides insight into the serpents, serpent deities and those with serpent aspects and associations that were linked to protection. The most renowned serpent protector deity was the Egyptian cobra goddess Wadjet. She became the uraeus cobra, symbol of protection of royalty. Other serpents served to protect the dead or even gateways in the underworld. Serpents such as Nirah appeared on Mesopotamian *kudurrus*,⁵ or boundary stones. Their function was to protect the landowner's property and the integrity of the oath. With the exception of the Israelite *seraphim*, protective serpents appear to have originated in Egypt and Mesopotamia.⁶ Egyptian influence in Syria-Palestine cannot be ignored however and the Egyptian influence of the uraeus cobra on the development of the *seraphim* is discussed. I have utilised the tables again in this chapter in order to facilitate comparisons.

Chapter Seven - Utilisation of the serpent in protection:

This chapter demonstrates the important role played by the serpent in sympathetic magic. Two clear paths are apparent. Firstly ancient Near Easterners felt a need to

⁵ A *kudurru* is a Mesopotamian boundary stone which functioned as a legal document regarding the granting or sale of land.

⁶ Randolph Joines (1938) discusses the link between the *seraphim* mentioned in Isaiah and the *saraph* serpents in Numbers of the Old Testament. She approaches the probability of a link between these divine beings and winged serpents that are found in Egyptian symbolism of royal and sacred origins.

protect themselves from snake bite and also from serpents on a mythological level, particularly the Egyptians with regards to the deceased. Amulets providing protection from the serpent have been examined here, as well as the role played by the snake in sympathetic magic. Secondly this chapter looks at the incorporation of the serpent into amulets of protection. Amulets such as the written and spoken word as well as objects were incorporated into apotropaic magic for protection.

Chapter Eight – Conclusion:

The conclusion summarises the most salient points of each of the preceding chapters. From this a conclusion is reached on the important variety of roles played by the serpent in the lives of the people of the ancient Near East with regards to healing and protection and its role in magic. Similarities and differences in the way the serpent is perceived within each region and between the regions will be more apparent. With the serpent there are always opposites. It has been used to symbolise and express views on life and death, as well as order and chaos.

CHAPTER TWO

MAGIC IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

In order to understand the varied roles of the ancient Near Eastern serpent within the realms of apotropaic magic, healing and chaos it is essential to have a general understanding of magic in the ancient Near East. The topic of magic in the ancient world is a vast one and too extensive to deal with comprehensively here. However a basic understanding will suffice and the aim of this Chapter is to create a background into which context the ancient Near Eastern serpent can be placed. This Chapter includes a brief discussion on ancient Near Eastern beliefs in magic and its role in the relationship with healing and religion. An explanation of the tools of magic such as words and images is given. The types of magic associated with the serpents of protection and healing that will be covered in this study are defined. It is important to understand the role of personnel such as magicians, priests and healers in general and serpent specialists in particular and their function within the realm of magic. This Chapter also touches briefly on the existence of serpent cults as their importance is relevant in understanding the ancient Near Easterner's perception of the serpent.

2.1 DEFINING MAGIC

Magic is the attempt to influence events through use of certain media such as the written or spoken word, use of images, ritual actions and the wearing and displaying of charms called amulets. It was thought that certain words, such as the name of a deity, or certain images, often representative of the deity, contained a power. This power was believed to be able to positively influence negative events such as an illness or the actions of a demon. Magic was therefore used to maintain good health and well-being and keep evil at bay. Geller (2010a:38) summarizes magic as humankind's 'expressions of anxiety and worry about angry gods, malicious demons'.

Magic in our modern world tends to have a negative association. This is probably because it is perceived to function in opposition to religion. However to the people of the ancient Near East there was no such issue. Early beliefs centred on magic in the

form of rituals and beliefs in spirits which later became deities, some of whom were anthropomorphosized. Some magic rituals became formal.

Magic was an aspect of religion. Davies (1898:241-242) believes magic is a type of religion. He cites the philosopher Hegel in saying that magic is a 'stepping stone on the way to religion'. Magic appears to form part of the process on the developmental road to religion. Furthermore Davies (1898:242) states that religion cannot be completely free of magic. This seems to cement the relationship between magic and religion. To my mind it suggests that organised religion developed out of magic. Furthermore, Davies (1898:242) says that 'magic and medicine have a close connection'. This is largely due to ancient humankind's belief that ill health was bestowed upon one by demons or evil spirits (Davies 1898:242). It would appear, therefore, that magic, religion and medicine were all interconnected.

It would appear that magic in ancient Egypt did not function in opposition to religion. From Borghouts (1995:1777) we learn that in ancient Egypt, for example, magic was something that was practised alongside the religious cults. It was also practised alongside medicine. Magic was therefore something that complemented religion and medicine rather than functioned in opposition to it. Distinction between magic and religion in the ancient world appears to have been irrelevant. The Egyptians did not distinguish between sacred and secular in healing activities and each separate activity combined to make up the complete health care system according to Weeks (1995:1788).

This essence of magic was deified as Heka⁷ in ancient Egypt. Ritner (2003a:192) explains that during the Old Kingdom Period Heka was the personification of the 'primary cosmic force'. Heka was perceived to be the son of the universal creator deity, Atum, and formed a part of various local triads right into Hellenistic times. Furthermore, says Ritner (2003a:192), Heka was believed to have been in existence before creation. Heka was a moving force, one that brought life and protection to the gods that would be created. There is a link between magic and the spoken or written

⁷ The correct transliteration of Heka is *hk'w* (Borghouts 1995:1776). However, for ease of reading I have chosen to use 'Heka' where the word pertains to the deified form of magic and *heka* (Pinch 2006:28) when the word refers to 'magic'. 'Heka' is also used by Ritner (2003a:193) and Nunn (1996:99).

word. Ritner (2003a:192) quotes a description of Heka as having ‘millions of *ka*-spirits within his mouth’. Heka represented the ‘divinely sanctioned force’ (Ritner 2003a:193) that created and maintained all and was diffused through everything.

Just as in ancient Egypt, the distinctions between magical and medical practices in Mesopotamia are not always clear. The ancient Mesopotamians did not place an importance on categorising. In other words they did not place magic, medicine and religion into different categories. Magic was a part of the religious system, explains Farber (1995:1896) and it went hand in hand with religion and medicine to provide a functional whole. In order to cure a stomach ailment, for example, perhaps specific herbs would be used in conjunction with prayers to the gods to alleviate suffering. Both methods were part and parcel of the curative solution. Biggs (1995:1911) also comments on the fact that medical and magical practices worked together. Medicinal cures came from plant, animal and mineral sources whilst magical cures came from the supernatural world. Geller (2010a:4) describes the relationship between Babylonian magic and medicine as ‘psychological and technical approaches to healing’ and also describes the relationship as complex. Geller (2010a:8) mentions that early studies by scholars such as Reginald Campbell Thompson and Rene Labat reveal that magic was very much a part of medical practise with incantations and herbal remedies appearing side by side.

In the ancient world of Syria-Palestine people also believed in magic and divination. The Israelites (especially the prophets) however, polemicised against these practices because they were very much aware of their existence. Unfortunately the amount of textual evidence regarding magic in this region is limited when compared to that of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

2.2 THE FUNCTIONING OF MAGIC

In magic, words or actions were used to achieve a desired outcome. Words involved the verbalisation of spells, incantations or prayers. Actions to achieve a desired outcome may include the performance of ritual activities, such as the burning of incense, the act of prayer, or the making and wearing of amulets. An object such as an amulet could be used in place of words or actions to achieve the same objective.

Borghouts (1995:1775) describes magic as ‘exploiting supernatural possibilities for specific unforeseen occurrences’. Magic and cults both involve relationships between humans and supernatural forces. Cults however focus on the relationship between man and gods. Borghouts explains that cultic activities are linked to cycles and events in nature and follow regular patterns. Cultic and magical activities functioned in conjunction with each other. Borghouts (1995:1776) points out that according to the *Instruction for King Merykare*⁸ the Egyptians saw magic as something granted to them by the creator god. It was therefore a divine phenomenon. Magic was something that could be commanded. It could reside in the physical body or in the spoken word. The ancient Egyptians differentiated between the type of magic practised by deities and human beings and the creative force only practised by the gods (Borghouts 1995:1777). An example of the latter creative magic was the annual inundation of the Nile. The magical force called Heka was ‘morally neutral’ says Ritner (2003a:193) and was available for use by good forces or enemy and chaotic forces.

2.2.1 Egypt

2.2.1.1 Magic and religion

According to David (2004:133) magic and religion were ‘virtually indistinguishable concepts in ancient Egypt’ and they were important in medical practice. Often magic was employed to treat a wound or a bite when medicine could have been used instead. Employment of magic to treat a wound could involve the recitation of spell or the use of amulets (Davids 2004:134). There are certain important beliefs held by the ancient Egyptians that David (2004:134) believes helps to explain their strong belief in the reality of magic. Concepts could be converted into reality by the divine creative word plus magical energy (Heka). The universe was created and maintained by this magical energy. The deities used magic as a tool against chaos (David 2004:134). Likewise the pharaoh used magic against his earthly enemies. Magic in the form of rituals was performed by the pharaoh and priests in the temples to maintain universal order. Magic was something that was a universal phenomenon and it was therefore omnipotent (David 2004:134).

⁸ This is also known as the *Teaching of Merikare*. It has been preserved in three New Kingdom manuscripts. It is a set of instructions from a dying king to his son and successor, Merikare (Beyerlin: 1978:44).

2.2.1.2 Magic as a tool against evil and illness

Budge (2001:xvi) mentions the *St Petersburg Papyrus* which states that magic was created for the benefit of humankind by the great god. One presumes a creator god such as Rā is referred to here. Specifically the papyrus says that magic was created to be used as a tool against evil occurrences. Magic was therefore considered to be a defensive weapon. Borghouts (1995:1777) draws an analogy between magic and warfare. To the ancient Egyptians use of magic was tantamount to engaging in warfare. Magic was a weapon used by the practitioner against disease or evil. The negative entity had to be identified before magic could be used against it. It was possible that the cause may be entirely natural; alternatively it may have supernatural origins. In this regard cause and treatment appear to have been considered rationally. Treatment for physical ailments could combine medicine and magic. It is interesting to note that, according to Borghouts (1995:1777), only magical treatments existed to counter the effects of snake bites and scorpion stings in ancient Egypt. He comments that no medical treatments are found within the known medical texts and that bites were dealt with by magical approach. However Ritner (2003b:208) discusses a handbook of the ‘Controller of Selqet’⁹ which reveals various medical treatments to deal with snake bites. Despite this, Ritner (2003b:208) does concede that for the expulsion of serpent and scorpion venom magical techniques do in fact predominate.

2.2.1.3 Negative ailments and entities

Negative ailments and entities fell into various categories¹⁰ and could be caused by the following:

- Anonymous entities who were considered to be enemies. These would appear to be supernatural.
- Demons or deities that could cause physical ailments.
- Identifiable physical ailments (toothache, headache).
- Unidentifiable ailments.

A headache, for example, could be perceived to be a demon and accordingly the spell was addressed to the demon. In other words the ailment was personified as a demon

⁹ This is the *Brooklyn Papyrus* (papyri numbers 47,218.48 and 47,218.85) discussed in Nunn (1996:183).

¹⁰ These categories are devised by Borghouts (1995:1778).

which was either male or female. Demons were perceived as negative forces responsible for illness and suffering. Some were nameless whilst others such as the Babylonian Lamashtu were well known.¹¹ Once the cause of the ailment or the problem had been identified action could be taken. Action could involve a reconstruction of events in order for the actions of the negative entity or causative agent to be undone. The magician may also use words to belittle or demean the appearance of the responsible demon in the case of demon involvement. Another method of halting adverse effects or circumstance was execration. In this instance the magician or priest would destroy a model of the entity. The model could be made of wood, wax or clay.

2.2.1.4 Spells

In ancient Egypt spells for the living differed from those for the deceased. Spells for the living were intended for protection from ailment demons or used for healing. They were also used for protection against dangerous people (the enemy) and animals such as snakes, scorpions and crocodiles. Mythology provided the inspiration for many spells. An example of how this functioned is explained by Pinch (2006:19-32). The sufferer was identified with a protagonist from one of the myths and by doing this the problem was elevated to the realm of the divine where magic or *heka* could take effect. Funerary magic ensured life after death.

A healer in ancient Egypt would recite a spell and his words were believed to provide healing for the sufferer. David (2004:135) explains that this recitation was often accompanied by music, singing and dancing. Certain substances such as incense, wine, water and oil were believed to be strong agents for magic and accordingly were used in the healing process.

2.2.2 Mesopotamia

2.2.2.1 Magic for the gods and humankind

¹¹ Lamashtu was a demon, daughter of the god Anu. She was believed to be responsible for the deaths of infants and the cause of stillborn babies (Leick 1991:110; Black & Green 2008:116).

Magic was not only bestowed upon humankind but it was something that the gods themselves used. This is well demonstrated in an example from Babylonian creative mythology concerning the goddess Tiamat. She created a host of evil creatures to fight the gods (Black & Green 2008:177, Budge 2001:4-6). To one of the gods, Kingu she gave a tablet and magical powers. The Babylonian god Marduk was appointed to deal with Tiamat and once he had defeated her he confiscated the tablet from Kingu and made it his own. This tablet was an amulet of sorts and was a source of power that had been used destructively by Tiamat. In Marduk's hands however it was not used for evil.

2.2.2.2 Suffering and the gods

The ancient Mesopotamians believed that suffering in terms of ailments and misfortune brought upon by demons was initiated by the gods (Geller 2010a:14). An illness was generally believed to be something that came from outside of the body and entered it (Biggs 1995: 1912). It could be brought upon the individual as a result of his or her sinfulness and appropriate repentance could convince the gods to alleviate suffering. Babylonians believed that disease had its origins in the divine realm (Heessel 2004:97-99). Diseases were wholeheartedly believed to have religious origin (Davies 1898:242). Sickness was able to enter a body because it was put there by a deity, or it arrived there because the person's personal deity had absconded from its protective duties therefore allowing demons to have access. According to Geller (2010a:39) appeasement of the gods would seemingly give the individual a better chance of not falling ill or suffering any misfortune. So it would appear that various creams could be applied and medicines could be taken but the root cause of the infliction could only be removed if the person was reconciled with his / her god.

2.2.2.3 Suffering and the ancestors

The dead in Mesopotamia, according to Biggs (1995:1913) may also be a source of problems for the living, particularly if they had not been buried properly. Similarly Pinch (2006:6) discusses the use of magic in ancient Egypt to explain misfortune which could be caused by displeasure of the gods or by malicious entities such as demons or ghosts.

2.2.2.4 *Omens*

Mesopotamians were great believers in omens. Omen interpretation was part of both apotropaic and prophylactic magic. The individual could seek advice from a practitioner who would provide advice. The advice would come from a divine sign which was usually given through extispicy (Faber 1995:1904). Sometimes the omen did not come through a practitioner but through a natural disastrous event such as an eclipse or an animal or child born with a deformity. The result of receiving an omen was that one could take steps to ward off disaster. This generally involved performing some kind of prescribed ritual. Farber (1995:1900) explains that sometimes the ritual itself contained instructions to prevent disaster or illness from occurring. This type of ritual was called ‘undoing’.

2.2.2.5 *A holistic approach*

Geller (2004:25) cites Sigerist’s (1955) view that in the civilizations of Mesopotamia magic, religion and science were all part of the same whole. Magic tended to focus on the cause of the problem whilst medicine concentrated on alleviating suffering of the individual. The approach to healing in ancient Mesopotamia was a holistic one treating the mind and body with incantations, lotions and potions. It is obvious therefore that a problem was dealt with from two approaches.

Magic in healing in Mesopotamia had two functions according to Geller (2010a:32). Firstly it was intended to influence the supernatural. This would include deities, demons and the unsatisfied dead. Secondly it was intended to influence the psychology of the patient and induce a more confident and positive state of mind. For example magic in the form of incantations could be used to assuage man’s fear of certain events such as a snake bite. Magic in ancient Egypt also had a psychological value and reassurance was provided by the use of rituals and amulets.

2.2.3 Syria-Palestine

There is no doubt that the practise of magic existed in the region of Syria-Palestine. However, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the links between magic, healing and religion are. The prohibition of various practices associated with magic are mentioned in the Old Testament, therefore it is obvious that they existed. A prime example is

found in Deuteronomy 18:10-11 as follows: ‘There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer’.

The Israelites appear to have had a negative attitude to magic from very early on (Davies 1969:31-32). An example in this regard is provided by de Tarragon (1995:2071) where he mentions ‘Hebrew religion’ as having an ‘aversion to divinatory practices’. Despite this attitude Davies (1969:29) also states that they employed magical means to repel demons and negative influences, and also used magic for protective purposes. The negative attitude is contained in the Hebrew Bible and may not accurately reflect the popular religion of the people or the true reality of their practices.

De Tarragon (1995:2075) mentions that in Ancient Israel and Canaan there appeared to be no strict boundary between magic and religion. Magic could be employed in an attempt to control the divine realm. Magic was also employed in therapy. An example of this use of magic is provided in the bronze serpent, which Moses apparently made, upon which the people gazed and were cured of venous snake bites (de Tarragon 1995:2077). Another example of magic employed to prevent and heal snake bites is found in two tablets from Ugarit (de Tarragon 1995:2077). In them, the divine realm is called upon for assistance. This would therefore appear to link magic, religion and healing together. The link between medicine and religion is further demonstrated in the comment that the priests were the ‘custodian of public health’.¹²

2.3 APOTROPAIC MAGIC AND AMULETS

Magic has a whole host of functions. What we are concerned with in this study is the serpent’s involvement in magic as it relates to healing, protective and preventative practises and the use of amulets in this regard (for a more in depth look at specific serpent amulets see Chapters Five and Seven). The discussion on amulets in this Chapter merely serves to provide an understanding as to how amulets functioned.

¹² http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0013_0_13493.html. Accessed 14 December 2013

The meaning of ‘amulet’

Petrie (1972:1) tells us that the word ‘amulet’ derives from an old Arabic word ‘*hamulet*’ referring to that which is carried. Budge (2001:13) cites Dozy who says that the word amulet derives from the Arabic *himâla* which he thought referred to the amulet and the chord used to suspend it from around the wearer’s neck. Both derive from the verb حمل (*Hamala*) meaning ‘*he carried*’.¹³ This would indicate that generally speaking an amulet is something that is portable and is carried around by the user. It can be worn around the neck or the arm or attached to the person’s garment. Interestingly the noun *hamla* which stems from the same root verb refers to an attack, offensive or campaign in the military sense. This ties in with the analogy drawn by Borghouts (1995:1777) between performing magic and warfare. Budge (2001:13) himself prefers the Latin origin derived from *amuletum* which refers to a means of defence. Nevertheless the Arabic and Latin words are remarkably similar and all point to an amulet being something that is generally carried around with which one defends oneself from negative forces by the power contained in the amulet itself .

2.3.1 The purpose of amulets

Apotropaic magic incorporates the use of amulets to repel harm or evil. It has two important values.

- Tutelary: the protection of a person, position or place.
- Prophylactic: specifically a preventative measure against disease

Tutelary and prophylactic practices are therefore both aspects of apotropaic magic. One of the most well-known apotropaic symbols is the blue and white ‘eye’ (known as the ‘evil eye’) believed to repel evil. It is commonly found in modern day countries such as Greece, Turkey and Syria. The eye can be hung in a room or above a doorway to provide protection. It can also be worn as jewellery and is often incorporated into popular tourist souvenirs. Ancient amulets functioned in the same manner (Budge 2001:13).

¹³ The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. Cowan (1976:206-207)

Not all magic was curative. It could also be protective. The burning of incense is an example of a protective activity. Protection took the form of an amulet which very often represented a specific deity. Protective or healing amulets could also include a stele or a statue as mentioned by Borghouts (1995:1779). Amulets were believed to contain powerful magic elements and therefore were able to provide healing and protection for the living. The ancient Egyptians had a tradition of bestowing them upon the dead for the same purposes for the afterlife. Humankind protected itself from evil spirits which could take on animal or human form and were believed to be responsible for illness and misfortune. Treatment and protection could be as simple as wearing an amulet or as complex as a ritual.

The use of amulets is universal and has existed across all time periods (Budge 2001:1). Amulets were in widespread use throughout the ancient Near East, being found in private homes and palaces alike. They were therefore used across all sectors of society. The amulet can be an object inscribed with words or symbols. Amulets have been in use for a very long time for protection from illness, perceived evil and dangerous animals. They also serve as a sort of lucky charm. The material from which the amulet was made was also believed to be a source of magical powers. So magic was present in substance as well as in the written or spoken word. An amulet was therefore not inert but a living piece of magical power. The will of the user or wearer of the amulet also came into play (Budge 2001:xxiii). This will of the user can perhaps be categorised as faith. Use of amulets has always been related to the desire of the individual to protect him or herself from negative forces be it illness or demons. Budge (2001:xxiii) explains that the user believed that the power of the amulet was obtained from the image or name of the deity or deity's representative that was inscribed upon it.

2.3.2 The functioning of amulets

There are five main ways in which the amulet functioned, explains Petrie (1972:2).

- Psychological effect: the wearing of an amulet can bring about confidence.
- Faith: The wearer believes the power of the amulet will provide

strength and healing. This promotes positive thought which probably plays a role in healing.

- Organ double: an amulet can be believed to be the double of a particular body organ. Care of the amulet reflects in the body organ and promotes healing.
- Body double: an amulet may act as a double for the wearer. The disease or demon attack is deflected from the person to the amulet.
- Sympathetic magic: based on the principle that objects that are similar are connected. Sympathetic magic has a tendency to incorporate the four points above.

2.3.4 Objects as amulets.

There were many types of objects that could be used as amulets. Amulets were believed to be powerful despite their seemingly inanimated nature. Amulets were often hung on the body (Budge 2001:19) and could, for example, be worn around the neck or wrist. They could also be hung on walls of buildings, buried under floors, placed in corners of rooms and at building entrances. An amulet was not necessarily a single object but could be several items grouped together and bound in a little bundle or pouch. These were often for medicinal purposes and were most likely made up according to prescription. In this regard Budge (2001:17) mentions various ingredients that would be placed in a 'purse or bag' and that the choice of ingredients was the domain of the medicine man.

2.3.4.1 Sumerians

The Sumerians buried their amulets in the foundations of their homes. They even incorporated them into dwelling walls. Farber (1995:1903) explains that usually the protective spirit amulets were positioned near places such as doorways, windows or other orifices where a bad spirit may enter. Early Sumerian amulets were often in animal form and included birds, fish, reptiles, rams, bulls, apes and horses. Some figurines had a design or inscription on their base (Budge 1978:86). Cylinder seals, whilst having numerous official and administrative functions, also served as amulets (Budge 2001:82). Many types of semi-precious stones amongst other materials were

used and the stone chosen had a specific protective quality. In addition Budge (2001:87) mentions that memorial tablets could function as amulets, as did plaques and figurines of deities and people.

2.3.4.2 Egyptians

There were many different kinds of amulets in ancient Egypt. Pinch (2006:104) mentions a catalogue of 275 main types whilst Petrie (1972:1) says he has grouped his research of Egyptian amulets into 270 different types. Whilst they were used in life it appears that they were also used in death. It seems that many amulets followed their wearers into the grave as most amulets have been found in burial situations (Budge 2001:133). In addition they have been found in dwellings and temples (Pinch 2006:105). Both palaces and private residences often had protective spirit figurines in them to protect them from evil spirits and demons.

Funerary amulets represented a large important group. Funerary serpent amulets include stones crafted into the shape of a serpent head (Budge 2001:147), cobra or viper (Budge 2001:152). Amulets in the form of protective spells were found on tombs, sarcophagi and coffins in ancient Egypt. They were found within the mummy wrappings and served to protect the deceased from harm. Scenes from the *Book of the Dead* comprised an important funerary group and were often used to decorate tomb walls (Budge 2001:160). Petrie (1972:5) claims that the development of amulets specifically for the dead is something ‘peculiar’ to ancient Egypt, and although they are found in other regions it is here that they are the most varied and detailed.

Egyptians believed that the wearer of an amulet would absorb the properties of the material from which it was made. Inscribed amulets were even more powerful than ones with no inscription and even stronger were those blessed by a magician, explains Budge (2001:133). He also mentions that protective amulets worn by the dead were most likely worn by the living as well. Indeed Pinch (2006:105) informs us that ancient Egyptian jewellery was a form of ‘perpetual’ amulet. Body adornment such as pectorals and necklaces held amulet value as the stones themselves were considered to be protective.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Petrie (1972:52) and Budge (2001:306-325) for stones and their qualities.

One specific type of protective amulet from ancient Egypt was a wand type of object. These were made from ivory and were flat and curved. According to Borghouts (1995:1780) the wand engravings that represented the powers of demons, animals and gods were intended to symbolise victory of the gods over evil forces. Examples of some of these wands show serpents (Pinch 2006:40-41). Statues and steles are mentioned by Borghouts (1995:1787) as being believed to store healing powers. These items were often placed in private homes or gardens (Budge 1969:267) or in public places like a necropolis or temple to serve as protection from dangerous creatures. They could also be buried in the ground.

2.3.4.3 Syria-Palestine

Much of what we know about amulet objects from the world of the Israelites comes from the Hebrew Bible and archaeological excavations. Their magic, according to Budge (2001:213) was influenced by the Sumerians and Babylonians. There were a number of Hebrew amulet objects. Included in this list of objects are the *saharôn*¹⁵, *terâphîm*¹⁶, *lehâshîm*¹⁷ and bells. Some Syro-Palestinian amulets have been found in tombs according to de Tarragon (1995:2079). They were intended to exorcise evil that had accumulated in life as well as in death.

2.3.5 Words as amulets

Both the spoken and written word had amulet value. Reciting of mythology is one such example. Two examples of reciting mythology are given by Borghouts (1995:1781-1782). These two examples are referred to in 2.3.5.1. There were numerous spells, prayers and incantations that were vocalised across the ancient Near East. Very often drugs for healing or protection were accompanied by a spell. In addition to the spoken word it was believed that the written word held power. For this reason spells were an important part of tomb and coffin décor, particularly in Egypt. Here funerary texts represented an important collection of amulets in the form of the

¹⁵ A crescent form ornament worn by camels, women and royalty (Budge 2001:213).

¹⁶ Anthropomorphic figurines probably influenced by similar figurines found in southern Mesopotamia where they were apotropaic household amulets (Budge 2001:214).

¹⁷ Ornaments inclusive of jewellery which were worn while incanting prayers and spells (Budge 2001:215).

written word. They consist of spells, incantations and prayers. I would think that some of these were intended for recitation by priests and others for the deceased to use. Most of these spells reveal the fear held by the Egyptians of all periods for dangerous creatures such as snakes and scorpions. These, they believed, were forms of evil spirits (Budge 2001:164).

2.3.5.1 *Mythology as an amulet*

Mythology was often used in remedies for bites and other ailments. Whether it worked or not is unclear. Perhaps the belief in the efficacy and power of the spoken word was sufficient to induce a positive frame of mind for the sufferer which in turn may well have aided a healing process. In ancient Egypt in particular mythology was the basis for many rituals, indicating a link between mythology and magic. It would appear that the inspiration for many amulets has its origins in mythology. Borghouts (1995:1781) explains that in ancient Egypt it was common for the sufferer to be compared to the young Horus¹⁸ whose salvation was as a result of the intervention of Isis. The god Ra had a secret name¹⁹ which he refused to reveal to Isis as it would mean passing on his power. Isis used magic to create a venomous snake in order to bite Ra. She did this in order to persuade Ra to reveal his secret name to her. She intended to hand his secret name to Horus (Borghouts 1995:1782). As Ra suffered he realised that only Isis could cure him, and as he neared death he capitulated. He told her his secret name in exchange for a healing spell (Borghouts 1995:1782). Words themselves can therefore be used as an amulet.

2.4 MAGIC PRACTITIONERS AND SNAKE HANDLERS

As the realms of religion, magic and healing in the ancient Near East blended into one another so too could the roles of the personnel in each of these spheres. A relationship existed between the magic practitioner, the sufferer and the negative element (demon or ailment). The priests of the ancient Near East were believed to have their powers bestowed upon them by the gods according to Budge (2001:xvi). Beliefs and practices

¹⁸ Horus was originally a sky god and his most popular manifestation was as a falcon (Watterson 1999:81). He was the son of Isis (Watterson 1999:85) and he came to represent the living pharaoh whilst his father Osiris represented the dead king (Watterson 1999:87). Horus was the protagonist in many important Egyptian myths including *The Contendings of Seth and Horus*.

¹⁹ Ancient Egyptians seemed to have their real name and the name they were commonly called. If your real name was unknown then a spell could have no effect on you (Brier 2001:11).

of magic and religion were intertwined. The gods were possessors of magic powers which they dispensed to humankind through the priests and magicians. It seems to me that distinction between these roles in ancient Egypt was irrelevant. Who were the practitioners of magic in the ancient Near East and more specifically, were there specialists who dealt with snakes? Mundkur (1983:83) comments that in societies where snakes were handled this handling was mostly the domain of the priests, medicine men, shamans or professional snake handlers.

2.4.1 Practitioners in ancient Egypt

Religious rituals were carried out by priests whilst magic was practised by the local magician. Medicine, as explained by Weeks (1995:1787), involved the use of magic and a medical practitioner had knowledge of magic and incorporated its use into healing if the diagnosis required it. Recitation of prayers by the priests to aid healing was just as important as the use of drugs administered by the medical person and amulets prescribed by the magician. Weeks (1995:1789) mentions that there were over 150 different types of healers. This would incorporate a variety of physicians and magicians.

2.4.1.1 Magicians and medicine

There were a few terms to denote a magician. These include *hk'w* translated as 'magician', *s'w* which is translated as 'protector', and *w'b shmt* being a 'priest of Sekhmet' (Borghouts 1995:1784). *S'w* is particularly interesting as it indicates one of the functions of the magician. These terms were sometimes used in conjunction with the term for doctor, as mentioned in Borghouts (1995:1784). This reinforces the complementary nature of the practice of magic and its ability to exist side by side with religion and medicine rather than function in opposition. To my mind it also links the two professions. Magicians were included in households and also on expeditions. They could be visited in order to receive rites of protection from evil (David 2004:134). At the top of the list of healers in ancient Egypt was the king who delegated powers to the priest-physicians and magicians (David 2004:135). Some of these personnel practised conventional medicine as opposed to magic. Others practised a combination of magic and conventional medicine.

As the magical and medical information was primarily in written format it stands to reason that it naturally placed a restriction on the accessibility of information to anyone but the literate elite. This literate elite was linked to the temple where the texts were deposited and therefore magic practitioners were essentially priests (Ritner 2003a:194). However, mentions Ritner (2003a:194), the illiterate sector of the population had simple protective and healing spells that were passed around in oral tradition. Most magical texts were considered to be secret, hence their placement within the temple.

2.4.1.2 Priestly magicians

Ritner (2003a:194) explains that amongst the priestly magicians was the ‘Chief Lector Priest’. This person safeguarded the sacred texts. Pinch (2006:51) also mentions that the sacred texts were under the care of the ‘lector priests’. This individual was responsible for recitation of formal temple ceremony hymns and incantations rather than the daily services. In addition to this the ‘Chief Lector Priest’ performed private ceremonies concerning apotropaic rituals. An example of an apotropaic ritual may be the recitation of a spell intended to cure a headache or a snake bite (Ritner 2003a:195) or it may involve officiating at a funeral (Pinch 2006:52). This same lector priest was the magician. He was essentially identical to the Mesopotamian priest-magician, in my opinion. This person served the temple and the community. The service to the temple was only for part of the year. The priests served on a rotation system (Ritner 2003a:194). In between these periods they could function as magicians for the community. Medicine and healing was associated with the temples in ancient Egypt. This, according to Ritner (2003a:203) gave rise to sacred healing. By the New Kingdom period certain temples such as that at Kom Ombo had a rear wall that was used as a shrine by the general public where petitions to the temple deity could be lodged.

The ancient Egyptian physician and magician were closely linked. Nunn (1996:116) tells us that the doctor was generally known as *swnw*, and that the *swnw* often had a title indicating a professional magician status (Nunn 1996:120). The physician was trained in the use of amulets, incantations and rituals for healing. Some physicians were priests. A specific type of priest-physician was the ‘Controller of Selqet’ who, according to Ritner (2003b:208), was a goddess of scorpions and snakes. Priest-

physicians, says Ritner (2003b:199), tended to be associated with the goddess of disease, Sekhmet, or with Selqet. This priest-physician was a specialist that accompanied mining expeditions into areas that abounded with venomous creatures such as snakes and scorpions. His job was most likely to provide psychological reassurance in the form of rituals and amulets. I would imagine that he also functioned as a snake charmer of sorts by enticing snakes out of living quarters of the miners. According to David (2004:135) the priests of Selqet practised a combination of magic and conventional medicine. These healers would invoke Selqet to treat snake bites and scorpion stings. Ritner mentions a handbook²⁰ of the ‘Controller of Selqet’ which dates to the early 30th Dynasty. In this handbook snakes are analysed by name, description, divine association and degrees of toxicity. Included in the manual are types of treatments that involve treating snake bites with topical applications, medicines to induce vomiting, incisions in the skin and spells intended for recitation.

2.4.1.3 Training of physicians

Weeks (1995:1789) says that very little is known about the training of physicians. He mentions that whilst scholars have speculated about specialists, most physicians appear to have been what we are familiar with as general practitioners. There appear to have been no formal schools; rather ‘on the job’ training seems to have sufficed (Weeks 1995:1789). Apprenticeships would have been the norm with knowledge passing from master to apprentice and from father to son. Attached to several of the temples was a ‘House of Life’ which appears to have been more a scriptorium than a school (Weeks 1995:1789) so it is unlikely that training took place here, other than the reading of textual material to gain information. According to Ritner (2003a:195) physicians and magicians did get training at the temple scriptorium. In addition Ritner (2003a:194) informs us that the scripts were ‘jealously guarded’ and that these magical texts were the property of the temple. Brier (2001:42) believes that the magicians came from the House of Life and not from the ordinary priesthood. An individual could come to the House of Life to obtain charms and spells from the magician.

²⁰ This handbook is in the Brooklyn Museum and is the *Brooklyn Papyrus* mentioned by Nunn (1996:183).

2.4.1.4 Snake charmers in Egypt

A reference by Borghouts (1995:1781) to a snake charmer's manual indicates that snake charming was a profession. An analogy can be drawn between modern day snake charmers and ancient ones. Modern day snake charmers in countries such as Egypt are called upon to lure out snakes hiding in houses. They do this by reciting chants. Upon finding a snake in hiding the charmer 'invokes the aid of supernatural powers' (Morris & Morris 1965:140). A charmer may not kill a snake. The snake charming traditions are passed down through generations in a family. A successful snake charmer is one who understands snakes and knows that they are deaf but sensitive to vibrations.

2.4.2 Practitioners in Mesopotamia

2.4.2.1 Magicians and physicians

In Mesopotamia some practitioners tended more towards magic and others more towards being a physician but ultimately what we define as magic and medicine were intertwined. According to Farber (1995:1903) there is circumstantial evidence regarding the existence of magical-medical practitioners. It seems that they may well have been employed to counteract negative omens as well as to heal the sick. The *āšipu* was the official magician connected to the temple. He could collaborate with official singers and chanters (Faber 1995:1903). There were possibly also temple magicians as well as magicians used by private individuals. Geller (2010a:43) refers to the *āšipu* as a professional priest who functioned as an exorcist. Geller (2004:23) also mentions the *āšipu* who visited the sick person's house, rather like a doctor would make a house call. His information comes from the *Diagnostic Handbook*.²¹ Maul (2004:79) too mentions the *āšipu* and refers to him as an exorcist 'entrusted with magico-religious treatments'.

2.4.2.2 Training of magicians

According to Farber (1995:1903) the position of official magician was one that was handed down from one generation to the next. Geller (2004:13) adds that medical texts were copied and studied by professional healers who belonged to certain

²¹ Mid 11th century BCE Mesopotamian medical treatise (Heessel 2004:97). It is an arrangement of medical symptoms and observations of disorders.

families. Some of these people were scribes with titles such as ‘physician’ or ‘therapist’. The profession was not exclusive to certain families as people outside of these families also learnt the healing trades in Mesopotamia (Geller 2004:13). A magician started out as an apprentice before becoming an *āšipu*. An *āšipu* could eventually become a chief exorcist (Farber 1995:1904).

The experienced magician could function as an exorcist to expel evil spirits by means of invocations and rituals. The *āšipu* was responsible for dealing with illness of supernatural origin (Biggs 1995:1919). This included demons, spirits of the dead and displeased deities. He was in effect the magician and the exorcist. Amongst his tasks was the ritual cleansing of the temple. He was the one who diagnosed symptoms of illness and their underlying causes. He was called in to assist with the process of reconciling the patient with his/her god, observing symptoms and making a diagnosis. However, a diviner could also be called upon to detect the underlying cause of a problem. Diviners in Mesopotamia were different from exorcists as they were not affiliated to the temple. Diviners tended to be employed directly by the palace, armies or local governments according to Farber (1995:1904). Diviners were the omen interpreters who interpreted signs from the gods. In addition to the most popular form of omen interpretation, extispicy, there was also libanomancy and lecanomancy. The former refers to omen interpretation arising from observation of oil patterns on water, whilst the latter refers to interpretation of smoke patterns (Faber 1995:1904). Ultimately the sufferer had to atone for some kind of moral violation (Biggs 1995:1912).

Geller (2010a:43) sheds more light on the role of the exorcist versus the physician. The exorcist (Akkadian *mašmaššu*, Sumerian *maš-maš*) dealt with the psychological element of healing. He was also able to double-up as a physician. He was called upon to prevent attacks from demons and deities by use of magic. In his role as a physician he was able to analyse the patient’s disease and give a prognosis. Like the *āšipu* the *mašmaššu/maš-maš* must have had temple access as he had the ‘social advantages’ of a priest (Geller 2010a:43). There are references to an *ašu* who seems to have been a physician that fulfilled more of a pharmacist function. He prepared the prescriptions – the lotions and potions, and did not have access to the temple. The *mašmaššu/maš-maš* dealt with the divine origins of a problem whilst the *ašu* dealt with the symptoms

(Geller 2010a:43). The exorcist was a priest hence his access to the temple and whatever literature was deposited in the temple precinct. Exorcists were also attached to the palace. The physician was a lay person and therefore was attached to neither. The exorcist had links to the divine and a whole realm of deities. The physician tended to be linked with Gula, the patron goddess of healing. Patients were primarily examined by the exorcist who acted as physician (Geller 2010a:43).

2.4.2.3 Snake charmers

According to a Sumerian lexical list of professions²² there are various words meaning ‘exorcist’ (Geller 2010a:45). Amongst them is a reference to a snake charmer being *muš-la-la-ah-hu* and various other words synonymous with *āšipu* and *mašmaššu*. Considered to be synonymous with *āšipu* on another list of exorcists²³ are the following which are all identified as snake charmers: Sumerian *nigru*, Akkadian *muš-la-la-ah-hu* and Akkadian *mušlah* (Geller 2010a:46). The inclusion of snake charmers amongst the list of exorcists is interesting and one can wonder why this would be. I suggest that snake charmers were a specialised type of exorcist called in to entice snakes out of dwellings. It may also be that the snake charmer dealt with the psychological aspect of snake bite victims. Astour (1968:17) makes mention of an early Sumerian list of professions from the Fara²⁴ period. It is not clear if this is one of the lists referred to by Geller (2010a:45), nevertheless a *muš.laḥ* is mentioned and is translated as ‘snake walker’ or ‘snake handler’. Furthermore, mention is made of Akkadian temple personnel listed among which is the *muš.laḥḥu* and *muš.laḥḥātu*²⁵, the latter being of the feminine gender. Snake handling was therefore not restricted to being a male profession. According to Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:7-8) the snake charmer was highly regarded and linked to the serpent god Ninazu in his temple at Enegi. The snake charmer was also linked to the serpent god Ningizzida at Gišbanda.

2.4.2.4 Snake priests

In the trans-Tigridian region of Elam there appear to have been priests that handled snakes. Examples from Elamite art are cited by Mundkur (1983:96) that seem to

²² Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon: 12 133:146-55.

²³ Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon: 12 133:146-55.

²⁴ Fara period: ED IIIa , approximately 2600-2450 BCE

²⁵ Also mentioned by Mundkur (1983:84)

support the fact that Elamite religion had an ophidian aspect.²⁶ An amulet shows an apprentice priest dancing with a snake. A steatite stamp has a ‘master of the animals’ theme with a human figure positioned between two very large snakes. Naked priests with snakes around their hips are seen on a cylinder seal impression. The theme of the naked priests with serpents is also seen on a bitumen relief of two priests with two serpents in *ouroboros* form between them (Mundkur 1983:86).

2.4.3 Practitioners in Syria-Palestine

It is apparent that there were snake specialists in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. These people functioned in the realms of healing and medicine. There appear also to have been exorcists and handlers – people who could ‘charm’ the snakes and remove them from dwellings and temples. Were there people in Syria-Palestine who handled snakes?

2.4.3.1 *The ḥakam*

The *ḥakam*²⁷ was a medicine man and magician of the Amorite period.²⁸ His function included the dispensing of medication, and the uttering of spells and incantations to drive off demons from the sufferer (Wood 1916a:56). He was therefore also an exorcist. It is pointed out by Wood (1916a:56) that many of these practises were similar to Babylonian ones and therefore likely to have been of Amorite origin. The *ḥakam* was the wise man. This role continued into the Canaanite period.²⁹ One of the feats of the *ḥakam* mentioned by Wood is the turning of rods into serpents. Moses and Aaron of the Hebrew Bible could therefore have been perceived to be wise men by their people.

2.4.3.2 *Moses and Aaron as magicians*

The accounts of personalities such as Moses and Aaron indicate that not only was magic practised in Syria-Palestine but that snakes may have been handled as well. The examples concerning Moses and Aaron are found in the Old Testament in Exodus 7. In Exodus 7:9-10 Moses is told by his god to instruct Aaron to cast his rod down

²⁶ See Figure 44, Mundkur (1983:86).

²⁷ I have used the transliteration of the word *ḥakam* according to Wood (1916a:225).

²⁸ 2500 to 1800 BCE (Wood 1916a:14).

²⁹ 1800 to 1200 BCE (Wood 1916b:164).

before the Egyptian king, at which point it would morph into a serpent. This he did and then the magicians of the king cast down their rods which also became serpents. The serpent of Aaron then consumes the serpents of the pharaoh's magicians. The point is not whether it is true or not but rather that beliefs in magic did exist. The rod could have morphed into anything but it specifically became a serpent. The rod seems to be a tool of the magician³⁰ and is believed to contain certain powers.³¹ The story of the interaction between Moses, Aaron and the pharaoh's men seems to be one of a contest between magicians, or men who were believed to be imbued with certain powers.

2.4.3.3 Priests as diagnostics of illness

There are numerous examples in the Old Testament that demonstrate that beliefs in magic did exist. Practitioners of magic certainly existed as Leviticus 19:31 instructs the Israelite people not to turn to 'mediums or wizards'. As in Egypt and Mesopotamia there may well have been a link between priests and medical affairs. One could deduce from Leviticus 13 and 14 that priests may have played a role in diagnosing illness as people who are suspected of having leprosy are brought to them for examination. The responsibility for diagnosing the illness rested upon them. Whether or not they played a role in healing is beyond the scope of this study but it is possible that there is some kind of a link. However, the role of the Levites and their possible serpent connections is worth looking at.

2.4.3.4 Levites as members of a snake tribe

The first form of political organisation was the tribe. The head of the tribe would have been the chief priest (Meek 1960:120). As society developed so city-states came into being and eventually the state. The state was headed by the king who also functioned as chief priest (Meek 1960:120). As society became more complex priestly duties were delegated to the priesthood. This state priesthood explains Meek (1960:121) came into conflict with the popular priesthoods. Logic leads us to understand that the king was the head of the most dominant tribe.

³⁰ A 16th century BCE Theban magician's tomb contained a staff in the form of a bronze cobra. (Pinch: 2006:11).

³¹ Again in Exodus 7 and 8 the rods of Moses and Aaron are used to bring about various events such as turning the waters of Egypt to blood and causing swarms of gnats and flies to emerge. In Exodus 17:6 Moses strikes a rock with his rod and water pours forth.

Wood (1916b:165) mentions the Levites as an early *Hapiru* tribe occupying the region around Mount Ephraim in the south of Syria-Palestine around the time of the Aramaean migration³² of 1400 BCE. Meek (1960:122) refers to the Levites as being a secular tribe of the south Syro-Palestinian region with a tribal god named Nahash. Meek (1960:123) indicates that the origins for this may be attributed to the setting up of the bronze serpent on the pole by Moses. Indeed Skipworth (1899:264) does suggest that the name of Levi was derived from a serpent deity. Wood (1916b:249) thinks that it is possible that a tribe would choose as a totem an animal that had a quality it revered for some reason or another. This totem animal became sacred and could not be eaten by the tribe. The serpent appears to be the totem animal of the Levite tribe and may have been revered for its subtlety. With regards to this secular nature of the tribe Meek (1960:123) believes that 'Levite' is not synonymous with 'priest' and nowhere is it mentioned as such. Wood (1916b:222) raises an interesting point when he suggests that Levites may have been lineal descendants of Canaanite priests.

Goldziher's (1967:226) comments on the Levites are interesting. Nomadic tribes tended to deify aspects of nature. Rain and clouds were deified and were synonymous with serpent worship as the serpent represented these aspects of nature.³³ The Levites called themselves *Benê Lévî* which according to Goldziher means 'sons of the serpent'. Goldziher believed that the Levites were the guardians of nomadic religion (1967:226).

So how did this secular tribe end up becoming the priests of Yahweh? Meek (1960:125) suggests that the tribes of Levi and Simeon, both southern tribes, made a play for political power against Judah which was becoming the dominant tribe. During this time of the Judges and early monarchy period, the Levites were battling against the rival priesthoods in the north. However, the tribe of Judah was stronger and eventually the Levites were incorporated. Unlike the tribe of Simeon which completely lost its identity upon being incorporated into Judah this did not happen to the Levites (Meek 1960:127-128). They very cleverly began to promote the god of

³² Aramaeans who invaded from the east and south of Syria-Palestine were known as *Hapiru* and this coincides with the occupation of the south by the tribes of Levi, Simeon, Reuben and Judah (Wood 1916:166).

³³ See Goldziher (1967:224-227) regarding worship of rain and serpents.

Judah – Yahweh. Many of their cultic practises would have transferred to the cult of Yahweh. As a result they became the priests of Yahweh and elements of their serpent cult became fused into the cult of Yahweh. Koh (1994:99) notes the incorporation of a snake cult in the Israelite kingdom into the cult of Yahweh. The link between the Levites and the cult of Yahweh would explain why the serpent cult was closely linked to that of Yahweh until the time of Hezekiah. This would explain the presence of the bronze serpent in the Temple of Jerusalem.

A link between the Levites and serpents is explored by Meek (1960:123). He mentions that the word *'lāwāh'* (לויה) means to 'twist, coil' and is the root for both 'Levi' (לוי) and 'Leviathan' (לריתן) (cf Chapter Three on Leviathan). Gordon (1995:2782) has proposed that one of the roles of the Levites was to ward off evil. One of his reasons for supposing this is the etymological link between 'Levite' and 'Leviathan'. Another link is the fact that there are serpent names amongst the Levites. In this regard Meek (1960) refers to Skipworth (1899:242).

Table 1: Inclusion of serpent names among the Levites

Name	Meaning	Reference
Īr-naḥash	Serpent	Man in 1 Chronicles 4:12.
Naḥash	Serpent	Ammonite in 1 Samuel 11:1.
Naḥshon	Serpent	Brother in law of Aaron Exodus 6:23; Numbers 10:14.
Nehushta	Serpent	Mother of Jehoiachin, a king of Judah. 2 Kings 24:8.
Saraph	Serpent	A ruler in Moab. 1 Chronicles 4:27.
Hobab	Serpent (from hub'ḇ)	Father in law of Moses. Numbers 10:29
Hawwah	Serpent (from hayyah)	Semitic name of Eve. Genesis 3:20.
Shephupham / Shephuphan	Horned snake (shephiphon)	Descendents of family of Benjamin. Numbers 26:39; 1 Chronicles 8:5.

Examples in Table 1 include Nahshon (serpent), the brother in law of Aaron. Skipworth (1899:265) also divulges this name as being that of a prince of Judah and an ancestor of David. This, Skipworth believes, indicates a link between the tribes of Levi, Judah and the house of David. He also speculates that they may have worshipped Nehuštan.

Another interesting link is made by Meek (1960:128-129) as he explains that ‘*naḥāsh*’ (נחש) (Hebrew for serpent) is very similar to ‘*nāḥāsh*’ (נחש) meaning ‘divination’. The consonants are identical. The difference is in the vowels. Here is a link between serpents and magic. Meek (1960:129) believes that the neighbouring tribes perceived the Levites to be medicine men or shamans.

Levi was one of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob and his household (Genesis 46:6-11). We can assume that they would have been familiar with the serpent deities and their roles in Egyptian religion. Moses, himself a Levite, would also have been familiar with all of this. As both Moses and Aaron were both Levites and both used a magic rod it would appear that the rod may have Levite origins (Meek 1960:123).

There does not appear to be any direct concrete evidence that shows the Levites as snake handlers or charmers but they do appear to have a number of serpent links that indicate that they originally had a serpent as their tribal totem.

2.4.3.5 *Snake charmers at Ugarit*

Further insight into the existence of snake charmers is gleaned from two tablets found in the private library of an Ugaritic priest. These tablets are prophylactic charms and will be looked at again in Chapter Seven. At this point however we are interested in evidence of snake handlers. A translation of part of one of the tablets is as follows:

From him the conjuror shall destroy,
From him, he shall extirpate the venom.
There he shall bind the serpent,
Shall feed the (serpent), the scaly,
Shall set up a chair and sit down (Astour 1968:16)

In the text *nḥš* is the term used for serpent. It is commonly used in Hebrew. According to Astour (1968:16) its use here is the first known in Ugaritic literature. The conjuror mentioned is a snake charmer. In Ugaritic it is *mlḥš*. It seems to be related to the Hebrew verb *lāḥaš*. In Ugaritic the verb is *lḥš* and in Akkadian *lahāšū*. It means ‘to whisper’ (Astour 1968:17). The above translation appears to indicate that the conjuror’s job was to handle the snake and diffuse the venom. The use of the word ‘conjuror’ is interesting. It suggests that the snake handler was perceived as someone with magical powers, someone who was able to handle a snake without being bitten

and someone who was able to seemingly communicate with the creatures. This particular tablet indicates that snake charmers considered themselves to be under divine guidance (Astour 1968:19). *Phlt* appears to be the patron goddess of Ugaritic serpent charmers. The second tablet has a section that refers to the collection of venom by the gods. The text refers to the picking of venom and ‘from the mouth of the Devourer, the poison they tore out’. This suggests that the poison glands may actually be removed by snake charmers. Knowledge of how a snake functions is also demonstrated in this text. Astour (1968:31) mentions that cobras cannot strike accurately in bright light - ancient serpent charmers knew this, hence the mention of the solar deity in this particular text. They were reliant on her to provide light in order for them to be able to perform their tasks. Astour (1968:36) concludes that as snake charmers do not appear on lists of temple personal or in corporations that they were not full time professionals at Ugarit. More likely, as suggested by Astour (1968:36) priests filled the role of snake charmer as required.

2.4.3.6 Snake charming as normal Canaanite practice

Serpent charmers appear to have been quite the norm in ancient Canaan. Their existence is attested to in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 8:17 reads ‘For behold I am sending among you serpents, adders which cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you’. The mention of the act of charming indicates the existence of the practise. Further, in Psalms 58:5 we encounter the following passage pertaining to adders being deaf: ‘...so that it does not hear the voice of the charmers or of the cunning enchanter’. In addition we have an example in Ecclesiastes 10:11 ‘If the serpent bites before it is charmed there is no advantage in a charmer’. From this it is quite apparent that snake charmers existed. Serpent charming, according to Robertson Smith (1995:55) was very common amongst the Hebrews and the most common form of incantation was directed at the creatures. Snakes were revered as ‘revealers’. This seems to infer that the snake charmer was the medium through which the snake revealed information. The charmer can therefore be considered to be an interpreter of sorts, rather like a dream interpreter.

Koh’s 1994 thesis presents archaeological evidence for the development and existence of a snake cult in the southern Levant. He mentions eight faience pendants found at Beth Shan dating to the Late Bronze Age. He suspects that these are suspension

pendants and would have hung from the cultic garments of the priests. If these are the priests of a serpent cult then we can expand the personnel associated with snakes in Syria-Palestine to include priests in addition to snake handlers.

2.5 SNAKE CULTS

A cult focuses its beliefs and rituals upon a specific deity or object. A serpent cult would therefore have a serpent as the object of worship or make much use of serpent symbols.

2.5.1 Mesopotamia and Egypt

Snake cults did exist in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The functions of the cults in these two regions are far more obvious than in Syria-Palestine.

The snake was very much part of Egyptian religion, particularly Wadjet, protector of the pharaoh and other deities. In addition there was Renenutet who was primarily associated with the harvest and fertility but was also a nurturer (cf Chapter Six on protective serpents). In Mesopotamia the obvious serpent god was Ningizzida, god of fertility and healing (cf Chapters Four and Six). The evidence from Elam referred to by Mundkur (1983:86) would suggest that there is a difference between priests who dealt with snakes as a service (healing, provision of amulets and removal of snakes from buildings) and priests who handled snakes as part of ophiolatory.

2.5.2 Syria-Palestine

2.5.2.1 *The unofficial snake cult*

Koh (1994:2) believes that serpent cults existed in the southern Levant in the Bronze and Iron Ages and were unofficial cults. In other words ophiolatory had a popular but unofficial following. This is not unusual as many cults functioned alongside the official cults, and shrines and temples were set up for the worship of the objects of these cults. This may explain the presence of the bronze serpent in the Temple of Jerusalem.

2.5.2.2 *A Bronze Age cult*

Koh's study (1994) is an archaeological one with evidence based on artefacts that carry snake motifs or are snake figurines. Although some snake artefacts are attested to from as early as the Chalcolithic, Koh's (1994:46) study shows that the amount of archaeological evidence incorporating snake symbols and bronze snake figurines begins to increase during the Bronze Age, particularly during the latter part of Middle Bronze II. At this time the distribution of snake artefacts is more widely spread across the Levant and increases in quantity into the Late Bronze Age.

The height of the serpent cults appears to have been during the Late Bronze Age and many of the snake artefacts of this period are found in cultic contexts (Koh 1994:69). The identifying of the Late Bronze Age as the height of the serpent cult would be deduced from the increased number of finds dating to this period compared to the Middle Bronze Age. In fact Koh (1994:69) believes that the cult was fast becoming a religion. Decreased numbers of finds during Iron Age I would indicate that the serpent cults seemed to have dwindled during this period. Many of these artefacts were found in private dwellings, shrines and temples. Artefacts include, but are not limited to snake figurines, vessels with snake motifs, cultic stands, pendants, plaques and rock engravings.

2.5.2.3 *The serpent in the Temple*

Koh's (1994:40) mention of the destruction of the bronze serpent in Jerusalem's Temple is indicative of the fact that a serpent cult did indeed exist amongst the Israelites³⁴ (cf 4.4.1 regarding the origin of the bronze serpent and its use in the Temple). The serpent cult was subservient to the Yahweh cult. This implies that the Yahweh cult was dominant over the serpent cult. It was not unusual practice for two cults to exist side by side in this manner. The presence of the bronze serpent was therefore initially tolerated in the Temple. The mere fact that the serpent was destroyed and that the serpent is the recipient of negative publicity in the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis indicates that the involvement of the serpent in belief systems of the time was important enough in popular culture to warrant attempted annihilation by official religion.

³⁴ 2 Kings 18:4.

2.5.2.4 *Moses and the serpent*

The link between Moses and the bronze serpent is established (cf 4.4.1 regarding the relationship between Moses and the bronze serpent/*Nahash*). An interesting point to add is that the father-in-law of Moses was the Kenite, Jethro. He was a Midianite priest. Finds in the Negev include a Bronze Age staff and serpentine rock engraving and an Iron Age I bronze snake figurine from a Midianite temple at Timna (Koh 1994:9). At the same site a votive altar with a serpent motif running along its edge was found. This also dates to Iron Age I.³⁵ Koh (1994:96) does not specify the use of the votive altar but points us in the direction of 2 Kings 18:4 where it is mentioned that the people of Israel had burned incense to the bronze serpent. It is therefore possible that incense was burned on this altar to the serpent.

2.5.2.5 *Absence of serpent temples*

Collectively the individual pieces of information are indicative of serpent cults within Syria-Palestine. No temples, hymns or texts dedicated to the worship of the serpent have been found in southern Levant (Koh 1994:28). This indicates that the serpent cult was subsidiary to mainstream organised religion. There was no national serpent god but the serpent was important enough to have a popular following and found its place in apotropaic magic. In this it played a role in serving the needs of the people. The serpents remain nameless with the exception of *Nahash*, the bronze serpent of Jerusalem's Temple (cf *Nahash/Nehuštan* in 4.4.1). Koh (1994) does, however believe that the serpent deity was female.³⁶

2.5.3 Positive perceptions

It is important to note the observations of McDonald (1989) and Koh (1994) in that the artefacts examined in their research conveyed a positive feeling and that there is nothing negative portrayed about the snake in Canaanite and Israelite culture from these artefacts. In general an example of the 'positive feeling' conveyed by the artefacts is the link of the serpent with healing and fertility in all three regions: Syria-Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia (Koh 1994:133). In Mesopotamia the snake god *Ningizzida* was linked to healing (Koh 1994:133, McDonald 1989:182), and the

³⁵ See Koh (1994:9, 96).

³⁶ See Koh (1994:91-92, 126-131) for the identity and gender of the goddess.

Egyptian cobra goddess Renennutet was linked to the harvest and granaries (Koh 1994:134). Furthermore Koh (1994:136) mentions the association of the snake with symbols of life, fertility and healing such as the bull, nipples, grain and plants. McDonald (1989:181) mentions that the appearance of snakes on cult stands links it to goddesses and fertility. Serpent imagery on pottery 'reflects an aspect of ancient Near Eastern religion and healing practices' (McDonald 1989:183). The perception of the serpent in Syria-Palestine is therefore by and large a positive one.

2.6 CONCLUSION

We should not attempt to create dividing lines by placing magic, religion and healing into categories as we then cannot understand these realms as the ancient Near Easterners did. Magic was employed throughout ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. It was used to heal sufferers and keep evil at bay. It therefore had healing and protective functions. Magic and religion did not function in opposition to each other as magic is an aspect of religion. It appears that the Israelites were the only group to develop a religious intolerance to magic. Despite this there are many examples of these practices in the Hebrew Bible.

In ancient Egyptian medical practice, magical and medical remedies were used together. They worked in conjunction with each other just as they did in Mesopotamia. Treatment was clearly aimed at mind and body and therefore holistic in nature. I believe that Geller's (2010a:4) reference to the magical component of healing as the psychological element is important. It guides our modern minds away from seeing magic as related to conjuring and rather towards viewing it as a practice taken very seriously by the ancient Near Easterner, particularly with regards to preserving the individual from harm and playing an important role in healing.

Magic was a divine phenomenon used by deities and humankind alike. Illness and misfortune was brought about by demons or dissatisfied deities. It came from the supernatural hence the use of powers from the supernatural realm (magic) to resolve problems. The cause of the problem had to be identified in order for appropriate action to be taken.

Magic involved the use of amulets in verbal, textual (prayers, spells and incantations) or object format to achieve a desired result. Amulets were widely used for protection and healing and were believed to contain magical powers. In addition it was believed that the choice of substance from which the amulet was made was also of importance. Amulets in object form could be worn. They were also used in buildings from dwellings to temples and palaces. Amulets were not only for the living but were also interred with the deceased.

The presence of the snake, real or imagined, was such a factor in people's lives that it warranted specialised personnel. Healers, medical practitioners and charmers appear to have had links to the temple and furthermore appear to have been connected to the priesthood. In ancient Egypt the practitioner was most likely to be dealing with snake bites and healing was the priest-physician known as the Controller of Selqet. A snake charming manual suggests the existence of charmers was highly likely. In Mesopotamia specialist snake exorcists were called *nigru*, *muš-la-la-ah-hu* or *mušlah*. They are identified as charmers and could be male or female. Priests existed in Elam that handled snakes. It is difficult to identify specific snake handlers in Syria-Palestine and even link them to medical matters but it is possible that the Levites may have filled this role. There were snake handlers at Ugarit. So it seems apparent that each region may well have had personnel that were most likely specialists in dealing with snakes from medical, magical or religious perspectives.

One of the most noticeable differences between snake cults in the regions in this study is that we know the names of the snakes in the cults of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The same cannot be said for the snake cults in Syria-Palestine. Irrespectively the snake was important enough to be worshipped and even deified.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SERPENT IN CHAOS AND MISCHIEF

3.1 INTRODUCTION

What did ancient human beings fear? Humankind feared disorder or chaos. People feared the darkness. They believed that the world in which they lived was filled with demons and evil spirits. People feared anything which may upset the ordered universe. They feared chaos. The symbol of the serpent was very often used to represent this fear as it was seen as a threat to order. The way in which the serpent symbol was used to represent this fear was to include it as the villain in mythology, funeral texts and art. Why the need for apotropaic magic? It was needed to protect humankind from chaos, disaster, illness and suffering.

This Chapter introduces the serpents that represent chaos and mischief and those deities and beings associated with chaos and suffering that used the serpent as their symbol or who had ophidian links. How these serpents, deities and chaotic beings of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Syria-Palestine were dealt with is covered in the following chapters. In what follows it will be investigated how the ancient Near Easterners placed the serpent in villainous roles. Humankind's fear of snakes and fear of disorder made the snake a prime candidate to represent the negative forces surrounding them. The role the serpent filled in the world of negative forces will be examined. First the threat caused by venomous snakes in the ancient Near East will be investigated. Secondly those that affected universal order will be looked at, and thirdly those that affected health and well-being will be examined.

3.1.1 Demons and hybrids

3.1.1.1 Demons

Demons were supernatural beings on a level between that of mortal humankind and the realm of immortal deities (Black & Green 2008:63). Mesopotamians recognised both good and bad demons. Black & Green (2008:63) explain that demons tend to be the 'upright human-bodied creature' and that monsters were deemed to be 'an animal

combination on all fours'. In other words demons were more anthropomorphic in appearance and monsters were more animal-like.

Demons inhabited in the human world. It was only from around the 1st millennium BCE in Mesopotamia that the concept of the underworld being populated by demons began to emerge (Black & Green 2008:63). It was believed that evil demons were instructed by the gods to inflict punishment usually in the form of a disease according to Black & Green (2008:63). These demons could take on serpent form or have serpent associations. The Babylonian Lamaštu is a prime example of an evil demon with serpent links. She is often depicted grasping serpents in her hands. Pazuzu was a demon who countered the effects of Lamaštu and he was endowed with a serpent phallus (Black & Green 2008:64-65).

3.1.1.2 Hybrids and serpent monsters

Hybrid serpents were not always malevolent but are included here in order to explain the form of the creature. Many serpent hybrids such as dragons do, however, occur frequently in association with chaos and disorder.

Snakes with two heads or two tails are an actual biological phenomenon. As Mundkur (1983:77) points out ancient man would have noticed this. Fantastical serpent creatures such as multi-headed serpents, winged snakes and dragons would have developed from this phenomenon. Monsters with serpent characteristics include the snake-dragon and the snake with multiple heads. A depiction of a two-headed snake is found on an early Sumerian cylinder seal of the Uruk period. On an Akkadian cylinder seal of the mid 3rd millennium BCE appears a seven-headed serpent monster and the Egyptian Nehebkau appears as a two-headed snake with a third head at the tip of the tail (Mundkur 1983:79).

In ancient Egypt snake hybrids found their way onto tomb walls from the Dynastic periods onwards. Examples of these hybrids, many of which occupied the underworld, are described by Budge (1972:103-105) as follows:

- Sedja: a creature with a serpent's neck attached to a leopard's body.

- Bata: a serpent with four human bodies and four pairs of legs attached to his body.
- Khepri: a serpent with a pair of human legs at each end of his body with the feet turned outwards.
- An unknown god of magic with the body of a fish, human facial features all balanced on equine legs and a snake for a tail.
- Seba: a serpent with twelve human heads emanating from his back.
- Shemti: a serpent with four human heads and four pairs of legs on either end of his body.

The Mesopotamians created all sorts of ophidian hybrids. One particular prophylactic incantation refers to the serpent having six mouths and seven tongues. It describes a serpent creature ‘bushy of hair, horrible of feature’ with frightful eyes (Wilson 2001:15). The Mesopotamian *mušhuššu* was an ophidian hybrid with seven heads. A single-headed example was very common and a familiar depiction of this was found on the enamelled brick-work of the Ištar Gate. It was also used to guard the palace entrance in Babylon according to Wilson (2001:14). The creature had a long neck, the head of a horned snake, feline front feet and vulture’s feet at the rear. This creature, which we would probably call a dragon, had a scaly body (Wilson 2001:14). The horned snake which inspired the *mušhuššu* was probably a viper such as the Arabian Horned Viper (*Cerastes gasperetti*). This same creature is referred to as *mušmahhu* by Black & Green (2008:165).

3.2 VENOMOUS SNAKES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

In today’s modern world we understand that chaos and ill health can hardly have been caused by these deities, demons and mythological creatures. To the ancient Near Easterner however these entities posed very real threats. Realistically the biological snake (as opposed to the mythological serpent, deity or demon) was far more likely to be the cause of untold suffering and death. By having a look at the venomous snake we are able to glimpse an understanding of *why* the snake was cast in the roles explained in this Chapter.

3.2.1 Venom

Knowing about the effects of the various types of snake venom allows us understand the fear of snakes held by the ancient individual. Three common types of snake venom that produce a variety of effects are discussed here.³⁷ For anyone bitten by a venomous snake the situation is alarming to say the least and victims often produce symptoms of shock in addition to reactions to the venom.

3.2.1.1 Neurotoxic venom

Neurotoxic venom produces symptoms such as drowsiness, vomiting, sweating, and vision and speech problems fairly rapidly after the bite. This is followed by difficulties in swallowing and breathing. The neurotoxin paralyses the respiratory muscles so without treatment the victim is likely to suffocate and die (Marais 2004:38). Examples of snakes with neurotoxic venom include cobras.

3.2.1.2 Haemotoxic venom

Haemotoxic venom does not cause an immediate noticeable reaction other than blood oozing from the bite wound. The victim may think that he or she is alright but within a few hours symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, sweating, headaches and confusion arise. Within twelve to thirty six hours however bleeding from mucous membranes occurs, followed by internal bleeding (Marais 2004:39). In the Middle East snakes that typically have this kind of venom include the Levantine viper and Carpet viper.

3.2.1.3 Cytotoxic venom

Cytotoxic venom results in characteristically painful bites that cause swelling to take place and swelling may continue to increase for up to seventy two hours. Tissue necrosis commonly results and it may happen that limbs and digits may face amputation or very severe scarring requiring skin grafts. In the ancient world this latter procedure would not have been possible. This type of venom is found in adders, vipers and spitting cobras (Marais 2004:37).

³⁷ See O'Shea (2005: 20-22) regarding the complexities of the variety of snake venoms and their effects on man.

3.2.1.4 Fear of venomous bites

Envenomation does not occur in all cases of snake bite (Marais 2004:37). Some species are not venomous to man. Even venomous species do not always inject venom with the bite. An adult snake is able to control the amount of venom it passes on with the bite. Venomous species vary in their degree of danger that they pose to man. Irrespectively ancient man had good reason to be fearful of snakes as the repercussions of envenomation were disastrous. Ancient man did not have access to the medical resources that we do today. The horror of being bitten and knowing the possible outcome must have been terrifying. The words of the Egyptian sun god Re in the legend of Re and Isis so aptly describe the fear and the onset of symptoms when he says:

I was bitten by a serpent which I saw not. Is it fire? Is it water? I am colder than water, I am hotter than fire. All my flesh sweateth, I quake, my eye hath no strength, I cannot see the sky, and the sweat rusheth to my face even as in the time of summer.³⁸

3.2.2 Venomous snakes

Whilst we may never know exactly what venomous species existed in the ancient Near East in the Bronze Age we can get an idea by looking at some of the modern day venomous snakes from the region. It would appear that the species have not changed very much in the last few thousand years at all.³⁹ So the snake species that we see today are very much the same ones that would have been seen by ancient Near Easterners. If anything their range may have altered slightly due to environmental changes. We can also see if we are able to identify some of these species when compared to ancient art and textual descriptions.

3.2.2.1 Differentiating between various species of snakes

As mentioned not all snakes have venom that causes the reactions described above. Some sectors of the population must have been able to differentiate between venomous and non-venomous snakes. The priests of Elam for example seemed to have been quite happy to handle snakes.

³⁸ Budge 1967:xc.

³⁹ Private communication with Professor Graham Alexander, Faculty of Science, School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand.



Figure 1: Elamite priests with snakes⁴⁰

Mundkur (1983:83) informs us that venomous snakes were probably defanged by handlers. One can imagine the awe in which snake handlers were held by those who were generally fearful of snakes.

3.2.2.2 *Viper versus cobra*

We should not underestimate ancient man's ability to distinguish between varieties of snakes. We do know that the Babylonians were able to distinguish between Viperidae (vipers and adders) and Elapidae (cobras).⁴¹ An incantation from the Old Babylonian period makes reference to the viper as 'the snake that cannot be conjured' (Astour 1968:17) - the Israelites, too, were able to tell them apart. Jeremiah 8:17 and Psalms 58:5 for example both refer to adders that cannot be charmed or are 'deaf'.⁴² There is a distinct behavioural difference between an adder and a cobra. One does not see snake charmers working with adders. Indeed Corkill (1939:49) says that vipers are not used by charmers. A cobra will rise up and follow the movement of the charmer giving the appearance of being conjured or charmed. The reference to the adder being deaf suggests that the snake did not behave like a species that could be charmed.

3.2.2.3 *Egyptian snakes and the Brooklyn Papyrus*

The ancient Egyptians were clearly able to distinguish between numerous species of snakes. The *Brooklyn Papyrus* is a testimony to this. This artefact in the Brooklyn Museum is a copy dating to c 300 BCE. The original is thought to date back to c 2200 BCE in the Old Kingdom period (Nunn 1996:183). The papyrus was a manual for medico-magical practitioners who may have been called upon to deal with snake bite victims. The *Brooklyn Papyrus* lists twenty one snakes although it is thought that it

⁴⁰ Elamite cylinder seal impression c 2300 BCE (Mundkur 1983:86).

⁴¹ Cobras are not the only elapids. Mambas also fall into this category but are not relevant here.

⁴² Snakes have an auditory nerve so are able to sense vibration travelling through the ground. They cannot hear sound travelling through air (Marais 2004:19; O'Shea 2005:13).

may originally have listed thirty seven. Some identification with snakes of our modern day world was made by the French scholar Serge Sauneron who translated the papyri into French. Nunn (1996) consulted with Professor Warrell at Oxford regarding identification. In some instances he concurred with Sauneron and in other instances he made a different identification. As a result we have a list of the following possible species identified by the ancient Egyptians:⁴³

- Spitting cobra (*Naja pallida*).
- Black desert cobra/Innes cobra (*Naja morgani* / *Walterinnesia aegyptia*).
- Burrowing asp⁴⁴ (*Atractaspis microlepidota*).
- Persian horned viper (*Pseudocerastes persicus*).
- Desert horned viper (*Cerastes cerastes* / *Cerastes cornutus*).
- Burton's carpet viper (*Cerastes coloratus*).
- Sand boa (*Eryx jaculus*) (non-venomous).
- Saw scaled viper (*Echis pyramidum*).
- Egyptian cobra (*Naja haje*).
- Puff adder (*Bitis arietans*).
- Sahara sand viper (*Cerastes vipera*).

3.2.2.4 Snakes species in Iraq

In his article *Snake specialists in Iraq* Corkill (1939) mentions various species of snake that may give insight into what species were around in Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age. There is the Javelin Sand Boa (*Eryx jaculus*) which is not venomous to man. This appears in Egypt as well (Corkill 1939:45). Also considered non-dangerous are Gray's Whip Snake (*Coluber ventrimaculatus*), the European Whip Snake (*Coluber jugulans*), the Common Water Snake (*Natrix lesselatus*), and Montpellier snake (*Malpolon monspessulana*). These varieties are all common in this region. The Hoodless Cobra (*Naja morgani*) is the same as the Black Desert Cobra found in Egypt. Also venomous is the Levantine Viper (*Vipera lebentina*).⁴⁵ Both are common species. Corkill (1939:46) mentions that this snake may be the deaf adder referred to

⁴³ Nunn (1996:185-186).

⁴⁴ Burrowing asps are also known as Stiletto snakes. They are highly venomous, inflicting a painful bite and should never be handled (Marais 2004:143-147).

⁴⁵ Referred to as *Macrovipera lebentina* by O'Shea (2005:59). This is the new classification.

in Psalms 58:5 as it is locally called the ‘deaf snake’. This snake, which has a few sub-species, is found from Iraq right through the Levant and into North Africa (O’Shea 2005:59). The venomous Carpet Viper (*Echis coloratus*) found in Egypt is also found in Iraq. The other venomous snake named by Corkill is the Horned Viper (*Cerastes cornutus/gasperetti*) (Corkill 1939:46). This may well be the inspiration for the horned snake common in Mesopotamian mythology and art.

3.2.2.5 Snake species in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel

Many of the venomous snakes found in Egypt and Iraq also exist in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. The Levantine Viper, Black Desert Cobra, burrowing asps and carpet vipers are some of these. In addition there is the Palestine viper (*Daboia palestinae*) which has beautiful zigzag markings and issues a hissing sound as a warning (O’Shea 2005:60). Many close relatives of the North African vipers occur across this region. This includes the Arabian horned viper (*Cerastes gasperetti*), Sahara horned viper and the Sahara sand viper. Also present is MacMahon’s viper (*Eristicophis macmahonii*) (O’Shea 2005:62).

3.2.3 Identification of ancient Near Eastern snakes

I would like to suggest a few snake species that may have provided the influence for some of the serpents mentioned in this Chapter.

3.2.3.1 Desert horned vipers

The Arabian horned viper (*Cerastes gasperetti*) is found from the Sinai across the Arabian Peninsula into Iraq and south-western Iran (O’Shea 2005:61). A scale over each eye presents a horn. The representation of Tiamat on the ‘Ain Samiya cup shows a snake with a fairly thick body rather like a viper. The patterning is similar to an Arabian horned viper. The representation of Tiamat on the *Williams cylinder* clearly shows a horned snake. This again makes the Arabian horned viper a likely candidate.

There are various representations of the *mušhuššu* dragon that could well be influenced by this same viper. Bašmu and the *mušhuššu* tend to be depicted with horns. Bašmu is the totem animal of the snake god Ningizzida. A prime example of


the *mušhuššu* is seen on the Ištar Gate of Babylon and it represents Marduk on *kudurrus*, or boundary stones.



Figure 2: Arabian horned viper⁴⁶



Figure 3: *Mušhuššu* dragon from the Ištar Gate⁴⁷

The Egyptian counterpart of the Arabian horned viper is *Cerastes cerastes*, the Sahara horned viper. This viper may well be the one represented in Egyptian hieroglyphics to represent the letter ‘f’ =  .

3.2.3.2 Red spitting cobra

In my opinion the red spitting cobra (*Naja pallida*) or a related species, the Nubian spitting cobra (*Naja nubiae*) may be the inspiration for the fire spitting cobras found in the Egyptian underworld. One such example is Kheti. In the *Book of Gates* he breathes fire at the enemies of Osiris. In the sixth hour of the Amduat Afu encounters nine fire-spitting cobras that spit fire at the enemies of the sun god.

The red spitting cobra is generally salmon coloured and can have a black band across its throat. It, rather than the Egyptian cobra (*Naja hajje*), may well have inspired the beautiful cobra crafted from gold and semi-precious stones found in the tomb of Senwosret II (Silverman 1997:29).



Figure 4: Gold and semi-precious stone cobra from tomb of Senwosret II⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Photograph of *Cerastes gasperetti* with kind permission of Dr Tony Phelps.

⁴⁷ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2009). Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.



Figure 5: Juvenile red spitting cobra⁴⁹

The black band on the red spitting cobra will be visible on the throat when the snake displays its hood.

3.2.3.3 General vipers

It has already been suggested by Corkill (1939:46) that the Levantine viper may be the deaf adder referred to in Psalms 58:5. Astour (1968:17) refers to a snake from an Old Babylonian incantation that ‘cannot be conjured’. It may be any one of the viper species that would have been found in Iraq. These include the Armenian rock viper (*Vipera raddei*), the Persian viper (*Pseudocerastes persicus*) or even MacMahon’s viper (*Eristicophus macmahonii*). The Huluppu tree snake (cf 3.4.1.6) that knows no charm may also be one of these.

I suggest that the Egyptian Apophis may have been influenced by a carpet or saw-scaled viper. Apophis is often depicted as a snake with patterning which these vipers have, as opposed to a cobra which tends to have a more uniform body colouration.

3.3 THE SERPENT AS A THREAT TO ORDER

In ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies the primordial world is chaotic according to Girardot (1987:1537). It was believed that chaos was the pre-ordered state of the cosmos. According to this belief there exists a watery matrix from whence the many of the primeval creative forces originate (Girardot 1987:1538). These creative forces are not always inclined towards ordered creation however and tend to oppose the

⁴⁸ Silverman (1997:29)

⁴⁹ Photograph of *Naja pallida* with kind permission of Dr Tony Phelps.

positive creative forces. Many of these pro-chaotic entities have been given an ophidian nature by the ancient Near Easterners.

Chaos can be represented by the monstrous creatures of the pre-ordered universe. Chaos could be overcome by order, says Girardot (1987:1539), often in the form of a battle. Order had to be maintained so a continual battle was waged between chaos and order. I believe that this universal struggle can manifest on a personal level. This personal level would refer to the maintenance of an individual's health and well-being in the face of illness and death which were represented by negative forces. These negative forces were demons or dangerous creatures such as snakes. It stands to reason that what was perceived by the individual as a personal threat could threaten the bigger picture as well. This bigger picture would be the world around the individual, his universe. Chaos therefore affected not only the universe but also the individual's health.

One of the most common images of chaos in mythology, comments Girardot (1987:1538), is water, be it a matrix of nothingness or a turbulent sea.⁵⁰ The chaotic potential in this image is visualised as a monster or serpentine being of sorts. This is noticed in cosmogonies of the ancient Near East.

3.3.1 Mesopotamia

3.3.1.1 Tiamat

According to the Mesopotamian narrative, in the beginning there was Apsu, the watery matrix from whence everything originated. Apsu is considered to represent the sweet subterranean groundwater (Leick 1998:11). Apsu gave rise to two deities being Anshar and Kishar according to Black & Green (2008:34). Kishar was a coiled serpent. This serpent appears to be a boundary and a protective serpent (Wakeman 1973:21-22). Anshar and Kishar began to prepare creation. Budge (2001:4) explains that eventually the gods of ordered creation (Ea⁵¹, Anu and Bel) came into being and began their work. This perturbed Apsu and he consulted with Tiamat and together

⁵⁰ Consider flood mythologies. They, too, represent chaos.

⁵¹ Ea has a sea-monster form. One of these forms, Sassu-urinnu, explicitly has a serpent head (Thompson 1904:149).

they hatched a plan to interfere with ordered creation. Tiamat sent Mummu to try and halt the work of the creator gods but Mummu was defeated. Budge (2001:4-5) adds that Tiamat gave birth to ‘devilish monsters’ and together with her consort Kingu intended to battle the other deities. These deities were led by Marduk. Tiamat was the keeper of the Tablet of Destinies. This was an amulet of sorts (Budge 2001:xx) and appeared to be the source of Tiamat’s power. It was used by her to perform chaotic deeds. The tablet, says Budge (2001:xx), was given to Kingu to aid him in defeating Marduk. Kingu took refuge in Tiamat but Marduk split Tiamat open with a spear. From one half of her body he created the heavens and from the other he made the oceans. Marduk confiscated the tablet from Kingu (Budge 2001:xxi).

The creation goddess Tiamat is considered by a number of scholars to have ophidian characteristics. Tiamat, Apsu and Kingu have all been described by Mundkur (1983:126) as monster serpents, representatives of primordial chaos. At the *akitu* festival the Assyrian ruler played the role of Assur and defeated Tiamat and the other serpents of chaos in a re-enactment of the *Enuma Elish* (Mundkur 1983:126).

Tiamat was depicted by ancient Mesopotamians as having a scaly body like that of a serpent (Budge 1978:4). She personified evil but was also considered to be a deity from which everything emanated. Barton (1893:14) maintains that Tiamat was portrayed as a dragon or serpent to convey her evil nature and that she represented chaos in the destructive power of the stormy sea. From Babylonian and Assyrian sculptures and seals it is learnt that Tiamat was perceived as a ‘sea dragon’. She had a feline or griffin head, wings, clawed feet and a scaly tail (Barton 1893:5). During the Assyrian era Tiamat in dragon form is represented on cylinder seals in conflict with Marduk. She also appears in serpent form on a cylinder seal⁵² (Ward 1890:291).

According to Barton (1893:1) Tiamat refers to the ‘personified sea’ and the female ‘mythical sea monster’.⁵³ She was also a creative entity (Barton 1893:2). The translation of line 45 on the reverse of a composite tablet⁵⁴ reads ‘like a serpent

⁵² Plate XVIII-2, *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of Fine Arts*, 6 (3) (Sep. 1890).

⁵³ Ward (1890:291) refers to Sayce and Smith’s *Chaldean Genesis* (1880:114)

⁵⁴ Two damaged tablets, one from Borsippa and one from Nineveh, were combined to enable a transliteration (Barton 1893:5).

Tiamat whom he had bound turned after him'. It refers to how Tiamat turns on Marduk. In this we can understand that chaos, the original form of the universe, opposes ordered creative forces represented by Marduk.

A silver cup was found in tomb 204a at 'Ain-Samiya.⁵⁵ Its form is described by Yevin (1971:78) as being similar to Mesopotamian pottery forms. Decoration on approximately 80% of its surface has been preserved. There are two scenes that are important as they are believed to represent the battle between Tiamat and Marduk (Yevin 1971:79).⁵⁶ Both depictions of Tiamat on the cup show her as a serpent. She has scaly patterns on her thick, almost slug-like body. In my opinion this body shape is what one would associate with an adder or viper. The human figure in one scene holds a plant towards Tiamat. Yadin (1971:83) explains this plant as one used to diffuse the venom of Tiamat. In another scene two other figures hold a crescent-shaped device above her. In the opinion of Yadin (1971:83) this latter scene represents the moment just before Tiamat is split in two.



Figure 6: Scene from the 'Ain-Samiya cup⁵⁷

3.3.1.2 Tiamat's monsters

The 'devilish brood' that Tiamat gives birth to consists of eleven monsters. Several of these have serpent forms. They include *mušmahhu*, *ušumgallu*, *bašmu* and *mušhuššu*. The latter is a snake-dragon whilst the other three are types of horned snake (Black & Green 2008:177). These monsters were all defeated by Marduk along with Tiamat. *Bašmu* and *mušhuššu* eventually became representatives of several Mesopotamian deities such as Marduk and Ningizzida (cf Chapter Six on protective serpents, specifically 6.2.2). Black & Green (2008:177) mention that members of Tiamat's

⁵⁵ 'Ain-Samiya is located north-west of Jericho.

⁵⁶ See Yevin (1971:79) for drawings of scenes from the cup.

⁵⁷ Drawing copied from Grafman's article (1972:49) *Bringing Tiamat to Earth*.

brood were invoked in incantations. The word *mušhuššu* was one of the words used by Akkadians to refer to the sea (Wyatt 2005:204).

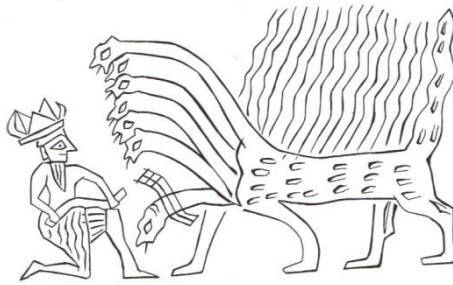


Figure 7: The seven-headed monster, Mušmahhu⁵⁸

3.3.2 Syria-Palestine

3.3.2.1 Leviathan

Leviathan is the legendary sea monster referred to in the Bible. It represents chaos and is the opponent of ordered creation. Reference to its serpent form is found in the root of its name *'lwy*' meaning 'to coil' (Machinist 2007:696). The Ugaritic form of its name is *'ltn*'. Machinist (2007:696) tells us that the name Leviathan is used interchangeably with other sea monsters in the Bible. These are *'tannin*', meaning 'dragon' and *'rahav*' and *'yam*' which both refer to the sea. *Nāhāš bāriiāh* meaning 'evil serpent' is both the Ugaritic and Hebrew name for Leviathan (Gordon 1995:2782).

Job 26:13 reads 'by his winds the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent'. This fleeing serpent is the *nāhāš bāriiāh* that Gordon (1995:2782) tells us refers to 'evil serpent'. Interestingly Goldziher (1967:27) has the translation as 'flying serpent'.

Feliks (2007:697) points us in the direction of various Biblical references for a description of Leviathan. Psalms 74:14 reads 'thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan'. Here is a reference to the sea monster as a creature with several heads. The reference implies the defeat of chaos, represented as a sea monster, by order which is represented by the Israelite god. In Psalms 104:26 Leviathan is referred to as a creature made by god. It is in Isaiah 27:1 that we learn of the sea monster as 'the

⁵⁸ Black & Green (2008:165). The drawing is from an Early Dynastic period shell inlay.

fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent'. The verse also informs us that the Israelite god will punish Leviathan with a sword and slay it. Again this is also a reference to the victory of order over chaos. We are informed of the gender of Leviathan in Job 41:1: 'can you draw out Leviathan with a fish hook or press down his tongue with a chord?'

Texts found at Ras Shamra have been pieced together to produce the dialogue between the gods Baal and Mot. In a retort to Baal Mot says 'E'en if thou shouldst smite Leviathan, the slant serpent, make an end of the tortuous serpent, that tyrant with the sevenfold heads, yet still wouldst thou fall weary, inert, exhausted' (Gaster 1944:34). It is not just through the Hebrew Bible that we find references to Leviathan and a description. Baal is a mighty weather god and Mot's reference to him being exhausted should he tackle the serpent testifies to the enormity of Leviathan's strength.

The reference in Isaiah 27:1 regarding the slaying of Leviathan with a sword brings to mind the Tiamat image on the 'Ain-Samiya cup. The fleeing serpent motif occurs on a hematite seal known as the *Williams cylinder*. Ward (1898:102) explains that the seal came into the possession of a missionary in Mosul⁵⁹ and Mardin⁶⁰, a Dr Williams. Whilst the provenance of this seal is unknown Ward presumes that he may have obtained it in the region where he functioned as a missionary. Ward (1898:103) somehow doubts that this cylinder is Babylonian or Assyrian though and may come from west of Mesopotamia. Nevertheless it depicts the familiar Mesopotamian mythological scene of Marduk chasing the dragon, Tiamat, with a sword. In this instance the dragon is clearly shown as a horned serpent. The Mesopotamian Tiamat represented evil, hence the serpent becoming the representative symbol of evil spirits. The concept of the deity chasing the fleeing serpent appears to have transferred to Syria-Palestine as is seen in the *Williams cylinder* and the description in Isaiah 27:1 (Ward 1898:103). Both the text and the seal would seem to represent the triumph of order over chaos.

⁵⁹ Mosul is in northern Iraq, north-west of Baghdad.

⁶⁰ Mardin is in the south-east of Turkey.



Figure 8: The Williams cylinder.⁶¹

3.3.2.2 Tannin

Tannin refers to a sea monster slain by Yahweh. The plural form of the word *tannin* is ‘*tannihim*’ and has been used to refer to sea monsters, snakes and dragons (Heider 1999:834). Indeed *Tannin* is referred to as a monster of chaos that dwells in the sea by Van Henten (1999:265). Goldziher (1967:27) associates *tannin* with a dragon. It appears that the magical rod of Aaron that transforms into a snake in Exodus was referred to as ‘*tannin*’ (Hendel 1999:746).

According to Wakeman (1973:70) *tannin* seems to be a general word used to depict snakes. The word ‘*tannihim*’ is used in Exodus 7:12 to refer to the serpents that the rods belonging to Aaron and the pharaoh’s magicians morphed into. This concurs with Hendel (1999:746) saying that the rods of Moses and Aaron morph into venomous snakes, being *nāḥāš* and *tannin*. The word is also used to refer to the sea-monsters created by the Israelite god in Genesis 1:21. In Deuteronomy 32:33 it is used to refer to serpents and asps. Wakeman (1973:73) believes that *tannin* should not be used as a proper noun and is more likely a generic mythological term. She maintains that *tannin* is also a synonym for *nāḥāš* and could be invoked for magical purposes (Wakeman 1973:79).

3.3.2.3 Rahab

Job 26:12-13 reads ‘by his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he smote Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent’. It is evident from this that Rahab, like Leviathan, is referred to as a fleeing serpent and is a representative of the sea. Rahab was a sea monster (Goldziher 1967:27), a storm dragon whose name held the meanings of ‘noisy’ and ‘defiant’ (Goldziher

⁶¹ Drawing of the Williams cylinder obtained from Ward’s (1898:102) article *Bel and the dragon*.

1967:423). One can imagine a great thunder storm with dark clouds filling the sky. It does indeed bring to mind a great angry cosmic dragon.

3.3.2.4 Yam

Yam was an Ugaritic deity who represented the sea as well as rivers. Offerings were made to appease him as he played an important role in the life of those who went to sea (Leick 1998:166).

Yam is known from his role in the Baal cycle of myths found at Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit on the Syrian coast. Leick (1998:18) explains that Baal was an important weather god but not the creator god in the Ugaritic pantheon. He appears to be the patron deity of Ugarit. Baal can only earn his position in the pantheon and gain a palace by being victorious over Yam, god of the sea, and Mot, the god of death. Yam demands that Baal submit to him. Baal refuses and they battle it out on Mount Sapan/Zaphon (Wasilewska 2000:115). Baal defeats Yam with magical weapons made by the dual craftsman deity Kothar and Khasis (Wasilewska 2000:115).

Yam is not an evil force like the Mesopotamian Tiamat. It is only as the stormy sea that he has a chaotic element. In fact as Wasilewska (2000:116) points out Baal almost causes the collapse of order by defeating Yam. Coogan (1978:82), in Wasilewska (2000:116), mentions that the sea is referred to as 'Lothan' and 'Serpent'.

Baal, however, is not the only one who is victorious over Yam. His consort Anat says of Yam 'Did I not muzzle the dragon? I closed his [mouth]! I smote the writhing serpent, Tyrant with seven heads!' (Wyatt 2005:21). In another passage from Ugarit texts Mot says to Baal 'when you smote Litan the twisting serpent, destroyed the writhing serpent, Tyrant with seven heads!' (Wyatt 2005:21). We now have a description of Yam as a writhing and twisting seven-headed serpent which is of the male gender. This description is very much like that of Leviathan. Yam, however, is deified whilst Leviathan and Rahab are not. It would appear that Wyatt's translation and that of Gaster are derived from the same source. Litan and Leviathan may therefore be one and the same serpent monster. Wyatt (2005:21) attributes the name Litan to Yam.

3.3.2.5 Storms and serpent worship

According to Goldziher (1967:28) the defeat of the sea monsters Leviathan, *tannin* and Rahab by Yahweh are the remnants of much older nomadic myths. Worship of rain is common amongst primitive people. Rain and storms became deified and Goldziher (1967:224) maintains this was synonymous with worship of the serpent because the rain was perceived to be a fluid serpent. However, new ideas came into being in which a heavy rain-darkened sky was a danger to the sun. The deified sun was opposed by rain and storm and hence the serpent became the enemy (Goldziher 1967:224). Understanding the Hebrew sea monster myths becomes easier if one accepts that they are based on older nomadic religion.

According to Goldziher (1967:28) lightning was the flying serpent whilst the curved serpent represented rain in older nomadic traditions. Both were enemies of the sun. Consider lightning as a phenomenon that has a light bright enough to rival that of the sun. Consider the storm clouds as phenomena that can cover up and devour the sun's light. If we can consider associating Yahweh with the sun god or transfer the traits of the sun god to Yahweh we can begin to make sense of how the Biblical sea monster myths evolved. Goldziher (1967:423) sees the sea monsters as storm dragons. In his view there are three forms of the dragon:

- clouds, which represent the coiled up form
- lightning, which represent the flying form (*bāriiāh*)
- streaming rain, which represents the extended form

The extended form (*Tannin* / rain) comes down from the heavens and enters the ocean where it becomes Rahab.

3.3.3 Egypt

3.3.3.1 Apophis (*Apep*)

It seems to me that the serpent Apophis is the ancient Egyptian embodiment of disorder. He is depicted as a monstrous serpent. The myths concerning Apophis involve creation and also the underworld and there are variations on these myths.

The Egyptian creation narrative records that in the beginning there was Nun, the watery matrix and the source of everything. In the matrix was the essence of a god called Neberdjer and a host of creatures described by Budge (2001:7) as the 'spawn of rebellious malice'. By employing the powers of Heka, Neberdjer became the creator god Khepera. In the role of Khepera he proceeded to form creation but this bothered the 'spawn of rebellious malice' (Budge 2001:7-8). Khepera created light and day but Seth, representative of dark and night, battled with day and light. Day and night were established. In addition the other creator deities were created. Seth, says Budge (2001:8), devised a plan to war against the sun god Re. Budge (2001:8) explains that in the eastern part of the sky he placed Apophis with his hoard. The intention was for Apophis to prevent Re from rising. However, Re dispersed of the hoard of Apophis by casting his rays upon them. He rendered Apophis paralysed by casting a spell upon him (Budge 2001:8). However, this defeat was only temporary for the following morning Apophis was lying in wait for Re and the battle commenced once again, just like it does every morning (Budge 2001:8). One of the results of Re's failure to permanently defeat Apophis meant that his evil demons were around and posed a threat to humankind (Budge 2001:8-9).

In Egyptian mythology the sun god Re travels on a barque through the underworld at night (Watterson: 1999:44). The underworld river along which the barque travels is filled with deities and demons 'blessed and damned alike' (Muller 2003:5). Chief of these demons is Apophis. He is slain and Re is 'rejuvenated in the serpent which embodies time' (Muller 2003:5). It is explained by Muller (2003:5) that this cycle repeats itself daily suggesting that the triumph of order over chaos is a continual battle. Apophis here represents chaos. In order to slay Apophis in some versions of the myth Re takes on the form of the Cat of Heliopolis and severs the serpent's head (Watterson 1999:44). In other versions of the myth it is Seth who protects Re by standing on the prow of the boat and slaying Apophis (Te Velde 2003:333).

The negativity that attaches itself to Apophis derives from the fact that anything that threatened light or the sun was considered evil or darkness. Light and sun is personified in Re and so darkness and threat are personified in Apophis. He was considered to be the enemy.

During the Old Kingdom period Apophis does not appear in texts or pictorial representations. Morenz (2004:202) thinks this may be because Apophis was part of popular culture and not state religion. It is highly likely that belief in Apophis was in existence during the Old Kingdom period. Apophis first appears in sources during the First Intermediate Period, a time of political upheaval and therefore chaos. The reason for this appearance may be due to changes in religious beliefs and concepts in popular thought beginning to emerge in official thought (Morenz 2004:203). One of the earliest references to Apophis occurs in the IXth Dynasty tomb of a nomarch, Ankhtifi of Mo'alla (Morenz 2004:201).

Morenz (2004:202) states that Apophis was never deified, hence the absence of any cult statues in his honour. Like other snakes of chaos in the ancient Near East he is associated with water. Morenz (2004:203) refers to Piankoff (1949) in saying that Apophis is coloured blue in some pictorial depictions which indicates his water association. Thompson (1970:135) mentions the possibility that the Mesopotamian myth of the conflict between Tiamat and Marduk may have diffused into Egypt around 2500 BCE and may well have influenced the concept of Apophis, the serpent demon.

3.3.3.2 The serpents of the underworld

The ancient Egyptian underworld was rife with snakes, the majority of which posed a threat to the deceased. Chief of these representatives of evil and chaos was Apophis. We know the names of some of these fiends whilst others remain nameless. Budge (1972:96) mentions Sebau, for example, who is a serpent fiend mentioned in the *Papyrus of Ani*, whilst Kheti was a fire-spitting serpent of the underworld. Other mythological underworld snakes include Aqebi, Sethra, Abtu, and Sethu (Budge 1972:96). However not all of the underworld serpents were evil. There were some that protected the sun god and we shall experience both types of serpent as we now embark on a journey through the underworld. The following journey of the sun god is mainly taken from Budge (1972: 357-368)

The Egyptian underworld (or Tuat / Duat) was the place where the sun went at night (Tobin 2003:242) and the place where the souls of the dead and spirits resided (Budge 1969:170/1972:351). Budge (1969:171) further explains that it was not equated with

hell but rather was another world, as distinct from the present world of the living. Within the underworld was a realm of immortality and happiness for the deceased. As Budge (1969:171) describes it the underworld was separated from Egypt by a range of mountains. It took the form of a narrow valley with a river that ran through its entire length – rather like the Nile Valley. At the western end of the mountain range was an aperture. The sun god entered the underworld through this aperture and exited at the eastern end. The souls of the dead entered the underworld in the same way. Within the underworld were a series of underworlds, and Budge (1972:352) explains that they had to be travelled through in order for the soul to reach the ‘abode of the gods’, presumably the place of happiness and immortality. Budge (1969:171) further explains that the route, however, was fraught with dangers, demons and evil spirits, many of whom took the form of snakes. Spells and incantations were designed to help the soul successfully traverse the perils of the underworld (Budge 1972:352).

The *Book of Coming Forth by Day* is a very old collection of hymns, prayers and incantations designed to assist the deceased in his journey through the underworld and provide protection from its perils. Its hymns, prayers and incantations were in existence prior to 3500 BCE (Budge 1969:174). According to the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* the underworld had seven halls. Each hall was entered via a door guarded by three deities (Budge 1972:353). The Elysian Fields of the underworld had twenty one pylons⁶² (Budge 1969:177). Each pylon had a gatekeeper. There was also a realm of Osiris in the underworld which was divided into fourteen states, each governed by a deity. State VI was Asest, the realm of Rerek, a serpent god who is described as being seven cubits long and having the evil eye. Asest was a state of fires (Budge 1972:355).

From the New Kingdom period onwards the priests felt that it would be beneficial to the deceased to have illustrations of all these various realms within the underworld (Budge 1969:173/1972:356). As a result vignettes began to accompany texts from the *Book of the Dead* on the walls of tombs. This was essentially the updated version of the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*. There are two versions of this illustrated guide to

⁶² Some papyri give ten pylons, and others give fifteen (Budge 1972:353).

the underworld. One is the *Amduat*⁶³ and the other is known as the *Book of Gates* (Budge 1972:356).

The *Amduat*/underworld was divided into sections called hours, explains Budge (1972:357). These pertain to hours of the night. The sun god sails along the waterway of the underworld and passes through each section or hour. In this context, says Budge (1972:358) Re is called Afu, a reference to the body of Re. The fourth hour was a region of large threatening snakes. The souls of the dead lined up on the river banks to aid the passage of the sun god. From Budge (1972:360) we learn that in the *fourth hour* the sun god had to leave his boat and embark upon one that was in effect a serpent body with snake heads at the bow and stern. Flames issued from the mouth of the serpent-headed bow to light the way along this darkened passage.

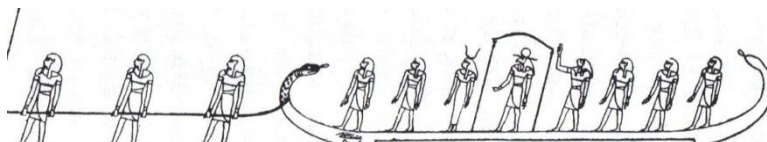


Figure 9: The serpent barque⁶⁴

Numerous hybrid serpent monsters are passed: two- and three-headed serpents, one with wings.



Figure 10: Multi-headed and winged serpents⁶⁵

In the *fifth hour* Budge (1972:360) relays that Afu encounters other perils including a monstrous two-headed serpent. At the *sixth hour* Afu disembarks from his serpent boat and once again clammers aboard his original boat. In this hour he encounters beings that he orders to destroy Apophis. He also comes across a five-headed serpent called *Āsh-hru* who is depicted as encircling Afu. This clearly is a protective serpent. In fact the realm of the sixth hour appears to be a realm of protective serpents as next Afu meets a large serpent that gives rise to the heads of the four sons of Horus, says Budge (1972:362). The four sons of Horus are the four deities that protect the major

⁶³ Alternatively known as *The Book of What is in the Underworld*.

⁶⁴ Budge (1969:217).

⁶⁵ Budge (1969:219).

internal organs removed during preparation of the body for mummification. Each one protects a canopic jar (Meltzer 2003:167-168). They are Hapy, Imsety, Duamutef and Kebehsenuf and appear in the *Book of Gates* where they restrain the *ummti* snakes with chains (Dodson 2003:133)

Next, says Budge (1972:361-362) Afu encounters nine serpents that spit fire at the enemies of the sun god. They cut up the shadows of these enemies with knives.

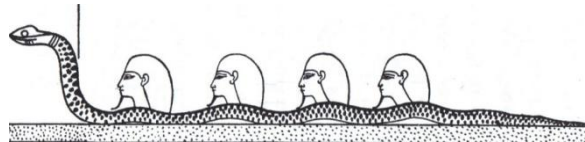


Figure 11: Serpent giving rise to heads of the four sons of Horus⁶⁶

Having traversed the region of the sixth hour Afu enters the *seventh hour* and his passage is restricted by sand bars and the serpent Neḥaḥer (Budge 1972:362). The serpent is strangled by a scorpion goddess who impales him with six knives. Afu is now given a protective shrine by the serpent Mehen.⁶⁷ According to Budge (1972:362) Mehen continues to protect Afu into the eighth hour.

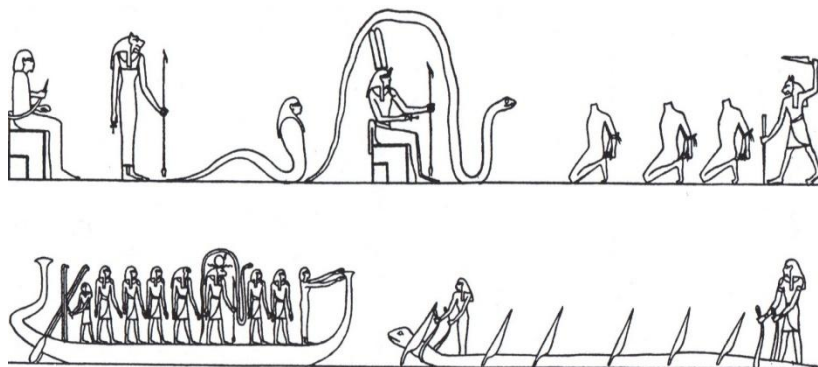


Figure 12: Upper register: the protection of Afu by Mehen.
Lower register: the slaying of Nehaḥer by the scorpion goddess⁶⁸

So Afu proceeds through the hours until he enters the *eleventh hour*, where once again serpents are encountered (Budge 1972:364). Until this point Afu has carried a *serpent sceptre* but it now becomes an ordinary royal sceptre. The front of his boat now carries a disc and the serpent Pestt (Budge 1972:364). There are twelve deities along

⁶⁶ Budge (1969:227). A remarkably similar illustration in Clark (1959:245) refers to a serpent giving rise to four human heads which represent the four cardinal points.
⁶⁷ A protective serpent deity against whom the deceased are believed to play draughts (Budge 1972:42).
⁶⁸ Budge (1969:231).

the river banks who remove Mehen. According to Budge (1972:364) he is replaced by two cobras, one carrying the white crown and the other carrying the red crown. Neith appears in four different forms. She was the mother of the serpent demon, Apophis. Sometimes she was represented as a golden cobra and as such was a goddess of life and fate (Johnson 1981:132). Temporarily winged and human-headed serpents appear. Horus, according to Budge (1972:365), appears on the left bank as a hawk-headed man and wears the solar disc and uraeus cobra. The boomerang weapon he holds is apparently a serpent which is thrown at the enemy.

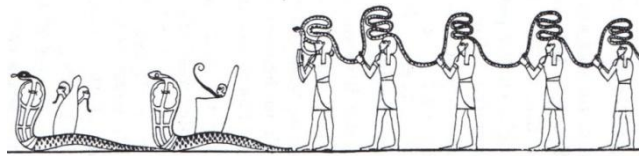


Figure 13: Serpents bearing the crowns⁶⁹

Finally, we are informed by Budge (1972:367), Afu enters the *twelfth hour*, the region preceding day. Pestt has been replaced by Khepri upon the boat's bow and it is pulled through the entire body of a serpent named Ka-en-ankh-neteru. As the boat enters the serpent Afu takes on a dead body but emerges new and rejuvenated as Khepri⁷⁰, the rising sun (Budge 1972:367). The serpent through which the boat is pulled appears then to have a renewing and life giving function.

The *Book of Gates*, says Budge (1972:368) likewise divided the underworld into twelve regions. The first region is called the antechamber of night and the twelfth is called the antechamber of day. There are twelve serpents each of which guard a gate. Budge (1972:368) lists eleven of them by name from gate two: Saa-set, Aqebi, Djetbi, Tekaher, Setem-arif, Akhan-maat, Set-hra, Ābta, Sethu, Amnetef and Sbi/Reri.

When the sun god Afu-Re enters the *first gate* he is dead. Khepri accompanies him and is encircled by an *ouroboros* serpent (Budge 1972:368). Upon entering *gate two* Afu announces that he has come to judge the dead. In the realm of *gate three* says Budge (1972:369) are twelve funerary shrines over which a serpent called Seti is stretched.

⁶⁹ Budge (1969:253).

⁷⁰ It would appear that Khepri in the form of the rising sun may be completely different from Khepri the serpent. They seem to be two different entities.



Figure 14: Seti over the funerary shrines⁷¹

Budge (1972:370) informs us that in the *fourth gate* Afu finds a mound divided into two. Upon the mound stand the goddesses of twelve hours. The monster serpent Herret lies in the divided mound and, says Budge (1972:370), gives rise to twelve serpents. The Twelve Hours consume the serpents. Afu next encounters the Lake of Cobras by which stand the Ten Living Cobras (Budge 1972:370). They promise loyal service to Afu in exchange for offerings. Next Afu meets a god in mummified form standing within a shrine. He is wearing the crown of the south and standing upon a serpent. A cobra goddess Nesert is positioned in front of the shrine, says Budge (1972:371).

We are informed by Budge (1972:371) that within the *fifth gate* a serpent named Nudji is being held by a group of deities. There appear to be no serpent forms within the *sixth gate*. However, we are told by Budge (1972:371) that Afu now enters the realm of the *seventh gate* where he encounters monster serpents who attempt to block his passing. They are led by Seba Apep (Apophis), says Budge (1972:372), who has twelve heads but he is devoured by the protective deities. Afu continues to the Pool of Fire which is guarded by a fiery serpent. In the *eighth gate* Afu encounters a fire-belching serpent named Kheti. He commands him to breathe fire upon the enemies of Osiris (Budge 1972:373).

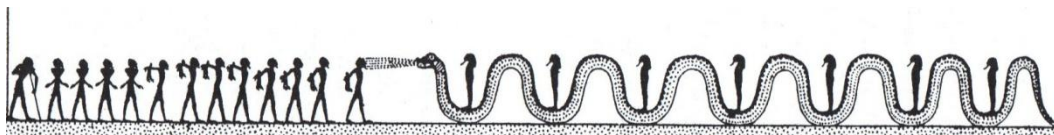


Figure 15: The fire-breathing serpent Kheti⁷²

The realm of the *ninth gate*, says Budge (1972:374) is dominated by the Powers of Evil. Here Afu will rely upon all his loyal gods to help him through. Afu passes

⁷¹ Budge (1969:183).

⁷² Budge (1969:193).

Apophis and Sheshes, the crocodile monster (Budge 1972:375). He passes Shemti, an eight-headed serpent and also the serpent Bata. A serpent Khepri with two cobras arising from his body is also encountered (Budge 1972:375). It is not clear how this serpent Khepri differs from the solar Khepri but he does not appear to be malevolent.

In the *tenth gate* stellar deities help Afu prepare to be born again as the rising sun (Budge 1972:375). There appear to be some benevolent serpents in this gate including Mehen who serves as a barque for Horus-Set who is accompanied by six serpents. Budge (1972:375) informs us that there is also Semi, a winged serpent and a serpent with two human bodies.

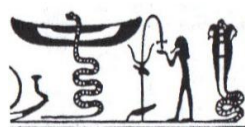


Figure 16: Semi and the serpent with human bodies⁷³

Budge (1972:375) relays that a battle ensues between Apophis and the protectors of Afu. Apophis is chained to the ground and prevented from advancing by a series of gods with knives. Each of these gods has four serpents emanating from a human body. The allies of Apophis are called the Uamentiu and they are restrained by Geb and the four sons of Horus (Budge 1972:377).



Figure 17: Uamentiu restrained by Geb and the Four Sons of Horus⁷⁴

Finally Afu's boat arrives at the *eleventh gate*. According to Budge (1972:377) Apophis is convincingly defeated. The sons of Horus destroy him with knives. The deities within the eleventh gate rejoice and Afu passes on his boat to the *twelfth gate* guarded by two serpents (Budge 1972:379). The cobras of Isis and Nephthys are also positioned by the doors of this gate. The sky goddess Nut gives birth to the sun god and a new day dawns.

⁷³ Budge (1969:197).

⁷⁴ Budge (1969:197).

3.3.3.3 *The serpent aspect of Seth*

The god Seth had a dual nature (cf 6.3.12.1 for his role as a protective serpent). Seth could symbolise evil and was therefore identified with the serpent according to Thompson (1970:134). He was the enemy of Re in the form of a hissing serpent. Eventually, says Thompson (1970:136), Seth became identified with Apophis. As Apophis was not deified, Seth lost his status as a deity. Rundle Clarke (1959:186) also aligns Seth with the serpent saying that ‘the snake was really Seth in disguise’.

Seth was a very old god from the Predynastic era, says Watterson (1999:100). He was generally associated with the desert and therefore phenomena associated with the desert such as dangerous wild animals, wind and rain storms, and also thunder (Watterson 1999:102). This is an interesting association and is reminiscent of the Palestinian/Levantine storm and sea dragons. Seth however was not a dragon but he was a composite animal. The Hyksos in the delta region identified him with Baal, who was a Semitic weather god according to Leick (1998:18). The serpent was one of the symbols of Seth (Budge 1969:247). Thompson (1970:134) verifies Seth’s identification with the snake and his role as a storm god. Seth is also referred to as a storm god by Rundle Clarke (1959:208).

The danger posed by Seth was found in myths where he endeavoured to prevent the sun from rising. In other words he opposed Re. In this adversarial role he took on the form of a monster serpent (Budge 1969:245) and was assisted by small snakes and other venomous creatures. The similarity with Apophis is now more apparent and we can understand why he was identified with the great underworld demon snake. He could also be known as Rerek. The hieroglyphs for Apophis and Rerek contain serpent symbols.

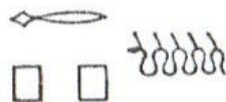


Figure 18: Apophis / Apep hieroglyph⁷⁵

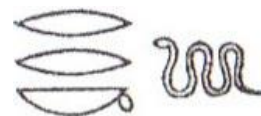


Figure 19: Rerek hieroglyph⁷⁶

The serpents in both sets of hieroglyphs can easily be seen. The symbol above the two squares in the Apophis hieroglyph looks like a serpent viewed from above. In the

⁷⁵ Budge (1969:245)

⁷⁶ Budge (1969:245).

hieroglyphics it can be seen that the head is differentiated from the rest of the body, which can be a characteristic of venomous snakes⁷⁷, although not all.⁷⁸ The widened portion of the head is where the venom glands are located. Non-venomous snakes *generally* do not have this proportion of differentiation.

3.3.4 Comparison between the serpent monsters of Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt.

Table 2: The serpents of chaos

Key to abbreviations

Egy: Egypt

Meso: Mesopotamia

SP: Syria-Palestine

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Demonised	Monster or dragon	Chaos	Chthonic	Water association	Storms	Ocean	Rain	Cohorts
Tiamat	Meso	F	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X
Leviathan	SP	M		X		X	X		X		X		
Tannin	SP	M		X		X	X		X	X	X	X	
Rahab	SP	M		X		X	X		X	X	X		
Yam	SP	M	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		
Apophis	Egy	M		X	X	X	X	X	X				X
Seth	Egy	M		X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X

For ease of reference I refer to the creatures listed in the Table above as serpents. The word ‘serpent’ seems to have more of a mythological connotation than the word ‘snake’. Indeed they are all linked to mythology. The following facts emerge from the table:

- The most noticeable difference between the above is that the feminine gender is only assigned to one serpent, Tiamat.
- They all represent a threat to universal order and the environment around the ancient Near Eastern person.

⁷⁷ Notes from Cape Reptile Institute lecture attended by the student (25 & 26 February 2012). Lecture given by Dr Tony Phelps.

⁷⁸ A rinkhals for example does not have a head distinct from the neck but is still venomous.

- Only Tiamat and Yam are deified. The serpents above in Hebrew and Egyptian mythology are not deified. Seth is only deified in his benevolent aspect (cf 6.3.12.1).
- All of the above are perceived as serpents or serpent hybrids. Tiamat, Apophis and Seth are viewed as serpents whilst those from Syria-Palestine have hybrid aspects such as multiple heads.
- The Egyptian serpents are described as demons. The Syro-Palestinian and Mesopotamian serpents do not appear to have been demonised.
- The Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian serpents are monsters or dragons. Apophis does not appear to be a monster and I suggest the word ‘monstrous’ is used to refer to his size rather than his appearance.
- Only the Egyptian serpents are chthonic. Those from Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine in the Table above are not from the underworld.
- All of the above serpents are associated with water. The water associations vary. Only Apophis and Leviathan do not appear to be linked to storms.
- The Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian serpents are linked to the ocean. It would therefore seem that the above serpents are either linked to the underworld or the ocean, not to both.
- Tannin and Seth are linked to rain through their storm associations.
- The serpents from Syria-Palestine do not appear to have cohorts in their chaotic deeds whilst those from Mesopotamia and Egypt do. Tiamat’s cohorts are ‘devilish monsters’ several of which had serpentine forms. Her other cohorts are Apsu and Kingu both of whom had an ophidian aspect. The cohorts of Apophis were either snakes or serpent hybrids.

3.4 THE SERPENT AS A THREAT TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

There is a difference between the serpents that affect cosmic order on the one hand, and those that are pure mischief makers or affect the individual ancient Near Easterner on a personal level. There appear to be very few serpent demons. There are

serpents that cause mischief in myths and legends. The biggest real threat from snakes to the ancient Near Easterners' well-being came from live venomous snakes.

3.4.1 Mesopotamia

In ancient Mesopotamia there are a few demons with serpent aspects. There are also several deities with serpent aspects and associations that are linked to ill health and injury. These conditions were believed to be brought about by certain deities that are more often associated with healing or protection and consequently we shall meet up with them again in Chapters Four and Six where their serpent aspects and associations will be discussed in more detail. It therefore seems that certain serpent deities have a dual nature. This does, however, make sense when one considers that disease and ill fortune were believed by the Mesopotamians to be bestowed upon humankind by the gods in response to some perpetration by the sufferer. These Mesopotamian gods that brought about suffering were the very same ones that were appealed to for removal of the suffering. First we shall look at the demons then the mischief makers followed by the deities.

3.4.1.1 *Asag*

Asag was a Mesopotamian demon responsible for causing pain and disease. Asag's method of killing was by means of a 'head fever' (Black & Green 2008:36). According to Leick (1998:13) Asag may be one and the same as the Sumerian seven-headed serpent. This calls to mind other serpents that have sometimes been described as having seven heads such as the Mesopotamian *mušhuššu* and *mušmahha* and the Syro-Palestinian Yam and Leviathan. Wakeman (1973:9) mentions Asag as a chthonic demon.

Asag was defeated by the god Ninurta (Ningursu) and a depiction of this dates to the 9th century BCE on slabs erected by Assurnasipal II at the Nimrud temple dedicated to Ninurta (Black & Green 2008:36). Here Asag is depicted as a lion-dragon.

3.4.1.2 *Lamaštu*

Lamaštu was a demon, a hybrid monster with the face of a lion. Whilst her totem animal was an ass or donkey (Black & Green 2008:116), she was often depicted holding snakes. She is described as gliding snake-like into houses (Budge 1978:109). Lamaštu's abode was the marshes, the mountains and the desert. It appears therefore that she could be found anywhere. She was the most feared of the Mesopotamian demons. Lamaštu seemed to prey on pregnant women and young children. She was believed to be the cause of miscarriage among humans and animals alike (Budge 1978:109). If the sufferer had a fever accompanied by jaundice especially involving infants then Lamaštu was believed to be involved. In fact any chronic condition affecting children was attributed to her, as were problems with pregnancies including miscarriage and premature labour (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:483-485).



Figure 20: Lamaštu demon holding snakes⁷⁹

3.4.1.3 *The seven evil spirits*

Contained in the *Utukki Limnûti*⁸⁰ tablets are references to the seven evil spirits. They appear in a number of incantations. These spirits seem to be present in the ocean and in the heavens (Thompson 1903:xlii). One of the seven is a dragon whilst another is described as a 'terrible serpent'. Judging by the translation in Thompson (1903:xlili) the seven evil spirits appear to be responsible for storms and possibly perceived to be accomplices to the storm god. They are described as creeping on their bellies like snakes (Thompson 1903:xliv). When they take on these snake characteristics they are able to pass from one house to the next. Not even a closed door can keep them out.

⁷⁹ From Amiet (1980:402). Picture from lower register of a slab depicting the exorcism of a sick man.

⁸⁰ Part XVI of *Cuneiform texts from Babylonian tablets*, etc contains texts from 138 clay tablets. Most of these contain spells, incantations and exorcisms from *Utukki Limnûti*, also known as the *Evil Spirits tablets*. These were originally written in Sumerian so the contents of the Babylonian tablets are based on earlier material. They were translated into Assyrian in approximately 650 BCE (Thompson 1903:XI-XII)

Aside from the environmental chaos caused by the seven evil spirits such as hurricanes, they caused problems for the individual. They were blamed for people feeling unsettled. They were responsible for wanderlust, general unrest and disorder (Thompson 1903:xliv).

In the 5th Tablet of the *Evil Spirits* series the seven evil spirits are referred to as the ‘bitter venom of the gods’ (Thompson 1903:51). This suggests two things to my mind. Firstly, they are aligned with serpents with the reference to venom. Secondly, as venom of the gods they have been sent by the gods. They were also called children of the underworld (Thompson 1903:51).

3.4.1.4 *The headache demons*

In the *Ti'i* series of tablets (the *Headache Tablets*)⁸¹ there is reference to a headache demon in Tablet IX. In this incantation the headache demon is compared to a snake: ‘like a snake, a snake it bindeth the head’ (Thompson 1904:81). Unlike the serpent and dragon members of the seven evil spirits this particular nameless demon is merely likened to a snake.

Another headache demon is the subject on an incantation on a tablet referred to as ‘P’ in Thompson (1904:87). This is a particularly nasty headache as it is believed to come from the underworld and is shaped like a whirlwind and ‘as with the fangs of a viper it shutteth up everything’ (Thompson 1904:87). Like the demon in Tablet IX it is also not a snake but attributes of a snake are used to relay the severity of this headache.

3.4.1.5 *Gilgamesh's snake*

Gilgamesh⁸² has a quest for eternal life (Sandars 1972:97). He seeks out Utnapishtim, survivor of a great flood who was granted eternal life by the gods. Utnapishtim sets a test for Gilgamesh which he needs to pass before he will give Gilgamesh the information regarding eternal life-Gilgamesh must not sleep for six days and seven nights (Dalley 2000:116). Gilgamesh fails the test but Utnapishtim takes pity on him and tells him of the plant of longevity growing on the ocean floor. Gilgamesh

⁸¹ Part of the series of tablets referred to in *Cuneiform tablets from Babylonian Texts, etc* (Thompson 1904).

⁸² A post-diluvian king from Uruk. He was believed to have lived somewhere between 2800 to 2500 BCE (Dalley 2000:40).

retrieves the plant and while he rests upon the shore a cunning snake steals it away from him (Dalley 2000:119). Gilgamesh is right back where he started: having to come to terms with his own mortality (Leick 1998:75). This snake is not chaotic or evil. It is simply mischievous. Whilst it does not pose a threat to Gilgamesh's general health it does rob him of the chance to possess longevity. This snake, in my opinion, is not deified or demonised.

3.4.1.6 The Huluppu tree snake

According to Mesopotamian tradition Wasilewska (2000:165-166) tells us that the south wind uprooted the Huluppu tree and deposited it on the banks of the Euphrates. Here the goddess Inanna found it and carried it off to plant in her garden at Uruk. The tree grew big and strong and Inanna wanted to cut off some of the bark in order to make a throne or a bed for herself. However, she was unable to do this as a snake resided in the base of the tree. The snake is described as a 'snake who knows no charm' (Wasilewska 2000:165-166).

Whilst this snake is clearly doing no harm the goddess is afraid of it for some reason. Gilgamesh is called upon to remove the snake for Inanna (Wasilewska 2000:166). This snake is not deified or demonised and merely provides an obstacle. The reference to the snake knowing no charm suggests that either it is unpleasant in nature or that it cannot be charmed or communicated with the way a snake charmer would communicate with a snake.

3.4.1.7 Ištar

Ištar was characterised by a snake emblem according to Morris & Morris (1965:46). She was a Babylonian goddess of sexual love and a mother goddess. She was also a goddess of war and punished those who sinned against her (Leick 1998:97). Prostitution was a legal enterprise in Babylonian times and Ištar was patron goddess of prostitutes (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:88) - not surprisingly a number of diseases for which she was believed to be responsible were diseases associated with sexual activity. Diseases in this category that Scurlock & Andersen (2005:89-97) list as being attributed to the 'hand' of Ištar are urethritis, vaginitis and syphilis.⁸³

⁸³ These diseases are linked to gonorrhoea and herpes.

Ištar was able to bestow arthritis of the hips, hands and feet upon humankind (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:255). Seizures resulting from head trauma were also attributed to her (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:306). As a goddess of war Ištar was deemed to be responsible for severe wound traumas, mental confusion arising from head trauma, wound infections and blood loss (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:468). The outcome for the sufferer in these instances was not positive. Nightmares in small children were also believed to be of her doing (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:368), as were visions of ghosts in adults (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:433). Psychosomatic pains in the head and chest and pseudo-seizures were another infliction caused by the ‘hand’ of Ištar. She was believed to cause some sort of skin lesion (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:454).

3.4.1.8 *Išhara*

Išhara⁸⁴ seems to have originated in the Middle Euphrates region and filtered south (Black & Green 1992:110). She appears in north Syria and is mentioned in a Hurrian text from Ugarit (Koh 1994:5). Išhara’s original totem animal was the bašmu snake but this was replaced by the scorpion from the Kassite era, hence the reference to her by Scurlock & Andersen (2005:499) as scorpion-shaped. Išhara was believed to inflict skin lesions in the upper abdomen and sub-cutaneous bleeding of the fingers. She also caused general weakness with a poor prognosis for the sufferer. These symptoms add up to meningococemia⁸⁵ according to Scurlock & Andersen (2005:499 & 543). She also caused bloating of the intestines and yellow spots on the abdomen.

3.4.1.9 *Ištaran*

Ištaran was a Sumerian chthonic serpent deity (Wiggerman 1997:42) whose deputy was the serpent god Nirah (Black & Green 1992:111). He was also the brother of Ištar. It is difficult to establish exactly what sickness he was responsible for. The sufferer is described as continually placing his hands on his abdomen and sucking his fingers. Apparently the sufferer stops drinking fluids, is confused and eventually dies - death results from fever and jaundice (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:572).

⁸⁴ Išhara was a by-form of Ištar (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:499).

⁸⁵ A bacterial disease in which the toxins of the bacteria break down the walls of the blood vessels (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meningococemia>). Accessed 30 October 2013

3.4.1.10 Ea

Ea was an Akkadian creator god who was also lord of magic (Leick 1998:37). According to Morris & Morris (1965:46) he sometimes had serpent attributes. Thompson (1976:63) gives us a description of Ea's serpent monster form. He had a serpent head with horns curled three times around. His body was that of a star-covered fish and his feet had claws.

Scurlock & Andersen (2005:420-421) inform us that ancient Mesopotamians believed that a tooth cavity was created by a worm that ate away at the tooth. A recitation for toothache indicates that the 'worm' may have been put there by Ea. The worm requested Ea to put it amongst the teeth in order to chew up food that lodged between them. Ea was not particularly linked to trauma injuries but if a person was sick for three days following an abdominal wound the sickness was attributed to the 'hand' of Ea (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:468). Further inflictions caused by Ea have been listed by Scurlock & Andersen as clustered lesions (2005:454), joint pain (2005:488), and lesions on the cheek and throat (2005:666). With regards to the joint pain this could be accompanied by a fever and a rash. This was partly attributed to Ea's deputy, a ghost and Scurlock & Andersen (2005:488) suggest this may have been something like German measles, hepatitis B or another type of viral fever associated with the mosquito.

3.4.1.11 Ningizzida

Ningizzida was a Sumerian chthonic deity whose totem animal was the horned adder (Leick 1997:131). He was the god of snakes and also of medicine. Ningizzida was believed to be responsible for complications that arose in wound injuries (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:468) as well as being responsible for bowel obstructions that resulted from abdominal injuries according to Scurlock & Andersen (2005:479) who also mention that the god added respiratory distress to his repertoire of inflictions.

3.4.1.12 Nergal

Nergal was a Babylonian god from the Old Akkadian period. He was lord of the underworld and known as a god of pestilence and disease (Leick 1998:127-128). His consort was Eriškigal (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:455). A statue in the Louvre which was found at Susa dating to the 16th to 15th centuries BCE shows Nergal riding a

chariot with a snake coiled upon his head.⁸⁶ The snake was perceived to be a benevolent creature in ancient Elam and was a symbol of the underworld. A god list of the Old Babylonian period lists Nergal with known serpent gods Tišpak, Inšušinak, Ištaran and Ninazu (Wiggerman 1997:34). I suggest that this strengthens Nergal's ties with the serpent and that the grouping of this deity with known serpent gods is indicative of the fact that he may well have been a serpent god himself.

Herbin⁸⁷ informs us that Nergal was a god of death in addition to being a god of disease so it is no wonder that from Scurlock & Andersen (2005:465) we learn that Nergal was believed to be a god of traumatic injuries that were generally fatal. Along with Ningizzida, Nergal could cause wound complications such as infections, death from haemorrhagic shock and vomiting of blood as a result of abdominal wounds. He was also believed to cause fever blisters (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:468, 473, 617, 455).

Despite causing mayhem in the form of traumatic injury and disease, Nergal was also known to bring about order. In a myth recounted by Wiggerman (1992:167) Bašmu is described as having been created in the sea. He is a venomous snake who devours humans and animals alike. Nergal is sent by the gods as a snake charmer to subdue Bašmu. Like many gods associated with serpents Nergal seems to have an opposite side to his nature.

3.4.1.13 *Eriškigal*

Eriškigal, a Sumerian goddess and queen of the underworld, sister of Inanna and consort of Nergal (Leick 1998:55) had a *mušhuššu* dragon named Mūtum as her messenger (Wiggerman 1997:34). We are told by Wiggerman (1997:34) about a god list called *An-Anum*. In this god list Eriškigal is grouped together with serpent deities Ninaza, Ningizzida, Tišpak, Ištaran and Inšušinak. A god list from the Old Babylonian period that is even earlier than the *An-Anum* list groups Eriškigal with Ninazu and Tišpak (Wiggerman 1997:34). This points to Eriškigal's serpent links

⁸⁶ Herbin, N. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/statuette-god-riding-chariot-coiled-snake-his-head>. Accessed 21 March 2012.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

being very strong indeed. Like Ningizzida, Eriškigal was linked to the constellation Hydra.

Eriškigal was considered responsible for wounds where complications set in and resulted in the death of the sufferer and in particular she was responsible for multiple injuries where the ribs were involved (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:465, 472).

3.4.2 Egypt

3.4.2.1 *In-dif and Djeser-tep*

Both In-dif and Djeser-tep are serpent demons who are considered to pose a threat to the deceased (Mundkur 1983:103). Both of these demons are slain by a cat with a knife. The slaying of serpent demons in this manner appears to be quite a common theme in ancient Egypt. This is one of the ways in which Apophis was slain. They may well be chthonic as they pose a threat to the deceased.

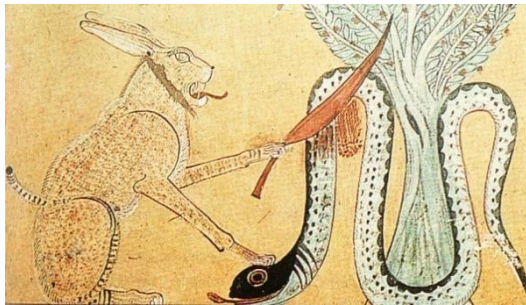


Figure 21:
The Cat of Heliopolis slaying the serpent Apophis⁸⁸



Figure 22:
The Great Cat slaying Apophis⁸⁹

3.4.3 Comparison between the serpents of mischief and ill health of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Table 3: The serpents of mischief and ill health

Key to abbreviations

Egy: Egypt

Meso: Mesopotamia

SP: Syria-Palestine

⁸⁸ From the 20th Dynasty tomb of a Deir el-Medina workman (Watterson 1996:45).

⁸⁹ From a funerary papyrus dated c 950 BCE (Pinch 2006:21).

M: male
 F: female
 ? : information incomplete or uncertain

Name	Region	Gender	Deity	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Demonised	Monster or dragon	Serpent association	Serpent aspect	Cause of fatalities	Mischief	Ill health	Chthonic
Asag	Meso	M			X	X				X			X
Lamaštu	Meso	F				X	X	X		X		X	
Seven Evil Spirits	Meso	?			X	X	X		X			X	X
Headache demon 1	Meso	?				X			X			X	
Headache demon 2	Meso	?				X			X			X	X
Gilgamesh's snake	Meso	M			X						X		
Huluppu tree snake	Meso	?			X						X		
Ištar	Meso	F	X					X		X		X	
Išhara	Meso SP	F	X					X				X	
Ištaran	Meso	M		X								X	X
Ea	Meso	M	X				X		X			X	
Ningizzida	Meso	M		X				X				X	X
Nergal	Meso	M	X					X		X		X	X
Eriškigal	Meso	F	X					X		X		X	X
In-dif	Egy	?			X	X					X	X	
Djeser-Tep	Egy	?			X	X					X	X	

The serpents in this table differ from the serpents of chaos as they are perceived to directly affect the health and well-being of the individual person. The individual can be living, deceased or mythological. The most noticeable aspect of this Table is that the region of Mesopotamia dominates. The demonised serpent in ancient Egypt tends to be associated with providing a threat to Re in the underworld, and by extension the deceased. In Mesopotamia similar serpents are more of a threat to the health and well-being of the individual and do not play a role in underworld mythology where their behaviour has chaotic repercussions. Two examples, In-dif and Djeser-Tep have been used here but there appears to be a lack of serpents in this category that play the same sorts of roles as the Mesopotamian snakes do. The Mesopotamian Išhara is listed as being present in Syria-Palestine as well. This deity will appear again in 4.4.10 as a

deity of healing. There do not appear to be any serpents from Syria-Palestine that can be included on this Table.

The following information emerges from Table 3.

- Amongst the Mesopotamian demons the gender of the Seven Evil Spirits and the Headache Demons is not clear. I suspect that they are male as texts usually indicate specifically if the feminine gender is intended.
- That aside, there appears to be no dominance of one gender over the other in terms of the serpents in this Table. Chaotic serpents on the other hand tend to be predominantly male.
- The deified serpents and the deities with serpent aspects and associations are not mischief makers. They are associated with illness (including physical trauma) that often leads to the demise of the sufferer. Just over half of these are chthonic.
- The serpent associations of Ištar and Išhara may well be linked to their healing aspects (cf Chapter Four) and not to their role as illness-causing entities.
- Lamaštu's serpent association is not linked to healing; rather her whole demeanour suggests that her serpents are used as symbols of terror.
- Only Ningizzida and Ištaran are actually serpent deities.
- Of the Mesopotamian examples only Asag and one of the seven evil spirits are demonised serpents. The other demons merely have serpent aspects or qualities.
- The Egyptian In-Dif and Djeser-Tep are demonised serpents and this seems to be inline with the nature of Apophis and his serpent cronies. In this regards Egypt overwhelms Mesopotamia by the sheer number of serpent demons contained within its Underworld.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Man's inherent fear of the effects of venomous snake bite has made it the ideal candidate to play two major roles linked to the pessimistic perception of the serpent in

the ancient Near East. Firstly fear of the snake placed it in the role of the villain that disrupts order. All major chaos mythologies across ancient Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia involve monstrous serpents as the representatives of chaos. Secondly the serpent was linked to ill-health through demons or deities that had serpent aspects, associations or serpent forms.

Venomous snakes posed a very real problem. Certain species occurred from Egypt through the Levant and into Mesopotamia. All three regions had cobras and vipers.

Observation of natural biological aberrations in snakes, such as those with two heads or horned snakes, combined with imagination and fuelled by fear of snakes gave rise to hybrids and serpent monsters in mythology and pictorial representations. By examining pictures of modern day snakes it is possible to suggest which venomous species may have inspired the serpents found in ancient Near Eastern mythology and art.

It is possible to place the serpent that cause chaos and ill health in tables and extract interesting information. This information is summarised after each Table (cf 3.3.4 and 3.4.3).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HEALING SERPENT

4.1 HEALING AND PROTECTION

Many of the very same serpent deities and deities with serpent aspects and associations that were responsible for causing disaster and illness are the ones that were appealed to in healing and utilised for protective purposes. There are two reasons for this. Firstly people believed that illness and misfortune was bestowed upon them by the divine realm. It was therefore common sense that this divine realm would be appealed to for assistance in alleviating suffering. This was particularly prevalent in Mesopotamia. Secondly, the very aspects of snakes that were feared as a result of venomous snake bite could be utilised and appealed to for protection. This defence was intended to protect individuals from snakes themselves. The use of the likeness of a snake to provide protection against snakes is called the doctrine of similar (Petrie 1972:3) or sympathetic magic. These attributes of the snake could also be projected against negative forces and enemy to protect deities and royalty (cf Chapters Six and Seven). Many of the entities associated with healing and well-being were also associated with protection.

This Chapter identifies the serpents and deities with serpent aspects and associations that were linked to healing. How healing and treatment was approached is dealt with in Chapter Five.

4.2 HEALING SERPENTS IN MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamian deities were represented in anthropomorphic form with the exception of serpent deities. There do not appear to be any other gods in animal form according to Black & Green (2008:166).⁹⁰ The anthropomorphic forms of the Mesopotamian deities that we are familiar with may not have been their original forms.

⁹⁰ The exception to this may be La-tarak, a deity with lion attributes (Black & Green 1992:166).

However, it is noted by Wiggerman (1992:151) that during the Akkadian period (2334-2154 BCE)⁹¹ some deities were only partially anthropomorphic and retained some characteristics of the animals that inspired their appearance. This explains why some serpent deities are eventually shown anthropomorphically and their symbolic serpent creatures take on their residual snake characteristics. This applies not only to the deities appealed to in healing and well-being, but also to those linked to protection. Jacobsen's (1970:3) opinion concurs. The anthropomorphic forms of deities were a relatively late development which is why the earlier numinous forms break through the surface of these human forms. Hence many deities have a cosmic or animal symbol. It represents the earlier form. Apparently the anthropomorphic form of the deity occasionally battles with the non-anthropomorphic form and subdues and even controls it (Jacobsen 1970:3).

Wiggerman (1992:152) explains that the representative creature linked to a deity covers a small aspect of that deity's sphere of influence. This representative creature can represent opposites. This would explain why, for example, the serpent can represent death but also be linked to healing. It can represent danger but also protection. This dual nature comes about due to the defeat of the dangerous creature by the deity. The chaotic or dangerous aspect of its nature becomes controlled. This concept goes back to the serpents of chaos being defeated. Order becomes victorious over chaos.

One could presume that as the gods were believed to be responsible for bringing about suffering and illness, just about any Mesopotamian deity could be a healing deity in addition to its other functions. Some, however, appear to be more responsible than others for bestowing suffering and ill health and therefore were appealed to more than others.

4.2.1 Ningizzida

Ningizzida was a Sumerian god of the underworld and of snakes. The Sumerians associated him with the correct growth of a tree through nutrients taken up by its roots

⁹¹ Van De Mieroop (2004:281)

according to Jacobsen (in Wasilewska 2000:172). As the Sumerians associated roots and snakes with each other Ningizzida became the god of snakes. Jacobsen & Alster (2000:315-316) explain that the sign for a tree root was *arina* which was composed from two crossed symbols for the serpent. This symbol of the crossed serpents is called a caduceus.

Ningizzida was the son of the Transtigridian⁹² snake god Ninazu. Wiggerman (1997:40) informs us that he was a warrior god⁹³ and a god of vegetative fertility. There is a reference to him as a Grand Serpent in one hymn, and a Terrifying Serpent in another (Jacobsen & Alster 2000:315).

Gudea, king of Lagaš, favoured Ningizzida as his personal deity and even built a temple in his honour (Van Buren 1934:65). Ningizzida was originally a god of vegetation and a guardian and it was after the death of Gudea that he rose to prominence as a healing deity in the Babylonian and Assyrian periods (Van Buren 1934:61). Various incantations testify to Ningizzida's role as an exorcist (Van Buren 1934:69).



Figure 23: Ningizzida leading Gudea to Enki⁹⁴

Ningizzida's totem animal was the horned dragon-snake Bašmu. A depiction of Ningizzida on a cylinder seal shows him leading king Gudea of Lagaš to the god Enki. Ningizzida is shown in human form but arising from each shoulder is the neck and head of Bašmu. Sometimes Ningizzida was shown riding upon Bašmu. The characteristics of a deity were often embodied by the vizier or messenger (Wiggerman 1997:37). This would explain why Ningizzida could appear in anthropomorphic form whilst Bašmu took on his ophidian aspects.

⁹² East of the Tigris River.

⁹³ Van Buren (1934:69) believes there is no real evidence to support the idea that Ningizzida may have been a war god.

⁹⁴ Illustration in Black & Green (2008:139) by Tessa Rickards.

Wiggerman (1997:40) mentions that Ningizzida’s cult centre was at Gišbanda in southern Mesopotamia. Leick (1998:31) adds several other centres to this, being Ur, Uruk, Nippur, Umma and Larsa. Ningizzida’s links to vegetation are emphasised by the fact that his spouse was Geštinanna⁹⁵, the ‘Lady of the Vine (Leick 1998:67). Ningizzida was furthermore associated with the Hydra constellation (Black & Green 2008:139, Leick 1998:31).

Campbell (1976:11) brings our attention to an Akkadian seal dating to around 2350 – 2150 BCE which shows Ningizzida holding the cup of immortality. Behind him is the entwined serpent emblem. This emblem, known as the caduceus, is what we have come to associate with the symbol representing medicine today. Another early representation of this appears on the libation cup of Gudea. This representation is most likely Ningizzida’s form prior to anthropomorphic representation according to Jacobsen & Alster (2000:315). The cup is in the Louvre Museum.



Figure 24:
Ningizzida on Akkadian seal⁹⁶



Figure 25:
Libation cup of Gudea⁹⁷



Figure 26:
Caduceus emblem⁹⁸

4.2.1.1 *The assimilation of Ningizzida with other deities*

Van Buren (1934:62-63) provides information on the possible assimilation of Ningizzida with other Mesopotamian deities. Three of these assimilations are of interest here. The first is Nabu, Son of the Babylonian god Marduk. This may explain one of the ways in which Nabu inherited the *mušhuššu* dragon. The second is a goddess named Ninahakuddu who was a goddess of spells and incantations. The relevance of this assimilation is that magic in the form of spells and rituals formed an important part of healing and both deities had this connection. The third interesting

⁹⁵ She is referred to as Ninazimua in Wasilewska (2000:171).

⁹⁶ Campbell (1976:11).

⁹⁷ Black & Green (2008:167).

⁹⁸ Clip Art.

possible assimilation is with a god named Šahan (also known as Sherah). As Van Buren (1934:62) points out both of these gods were underworld gods with serpent characteristics. Randolph Joines (1938:121) mentions a Mesopotamian deity named Šahan. This deity is female however, so it is not clear if they are one and the same. It was not unusual for the gender of a deity to change and many early deities did not have a specific gender assigned to them. (cf 4.2.9 below on Šahan). Ningizzida himself may originally have been female as ‘nin’ is a feminine epithet. In fact Frothingham (1916:192) mentions that Ningizzida was sometimes considered female as the consort of the solar deity.

4.2.2 Ninazu

Ninazu was a Sumerian underworld god and the father of Ningizzida. His cult centres, according to Black & Green (2008:137) and Wiggerman (1997:35) were at Enegi in southern Sumer and at Ešnunna in the Diyala region. According to Black & Green (2008:137) Ninazu worshipped at Enegi may not necessarily be one and the same Ninazu that was worshipped at Ešnunna. Ninazu was the son of the goddess Eriškigal in one tradition (Wiggerman 1997:35) and of Ninisina in another. He is sometimes referred to as the consort of both goddesses. In a Babylonian incantation he is referred to as a ‘king of snakes’ (Wiggerman 1997:35 & 1992:152). Ninazu was eventually succeeded at his cult centre, Ešnunna, by the serpent god Tišpak. According to Wilson (2001:33) Ninazu, whose name means ‘Lord Healer’, is the prototype of the West Semitic healing deity, although he does not specify who this healing deity is.

The remnants of Ninazu’s serpent form are seen in a stone sculpture from Ešnunna where he is portrayed with scales. In the Early Dynastic III period (ED III) he is portrayed on a cylinder seal in human form riding upon *mušhuššu* (Wiggerman 1997:36).

Ninazu’s vizier was the Sumerian deity Ipa’um.⁹⁹ It must be remembered that gods had families and courts as life on earth was a reflection of the divine realm. The name of this deity appears to translate to ‘viper’. Ipa’um is portrayed in anthropomorphic

⁹⁹ Also referred to as Ippû and Ibaum which appear to be one and the same (Wiggerman 1997:37).

form whilst rays of vipers emanate from the shoulders of the god to whom he functions as vizier (Wiggerman 1997:37). It is possible that Ipa'um is the same god as Ippû that served as vizier to Ningizzida.

The *mušhuššu* dragon, symbol of Ninazu was originally portrayed as a lion with a snake's tail and eventually developed into a scaly dragon with a snake's head, says Wiggerman (1997:36). Ninazu is depicted riding upon the *mušhuššu*. Tišpak is similarly depicted and it is difficult to differentiate between the two gods (Wiggerman 1997:36).

Ninazu has an agricultural link. It was believed that Ninazu and his brother Ninmada, the snake charmer for the god Enlil, were responsible for taking flax and grain to the Sumerians (Wiggerman 1997:42). Snakes seem to be very much part of earthly activities. They crawl on its surface and they disappear beneath it. It is little wonder that they have agricultural, vegetation and chthonic associations.

4.2.3 Tišpak

Tišpak is yet another Sumerian chthonic deity. He succeeds Ninazu at Ešnunna from the Old Akkadian period (Wiggerman 1997:37). His vizier appears to be Bašmu and he too uses the *mušhuššu* dragon. The councillor of Tišpak is Ušum-ur-sag¹⁰⁰ and like Bašmu he too is a serpent being. I would think that it is highly likely that Tišpak assumed the role of Ninazu as he adopts Bašmu and the *mušhuššu* dragon.

Apart from their chthonic associations both Tišpak and Ninazu were warrior gods at Ešnunna and can be identified by the maces they hold (Wiggerman 1997:37). Tišpak is often shown seated upon his *mušhuššu* dragon. Sometimes he is shown with serpents emanating from his feet. Wiggerman (1997:38) mentions an Akkadian seal in which Tišpak is shown holding a plough. This would indicate an agricultural aspect to his nature. Another seal from Ešnunna itself depicts the *mušhuššu* dragon ploughing a field. This seems to suggest some kind of link between agriculture and certain serpent deities. Some scholars have identified the *mušhuššu* with the plough as Bašmu.

¹⁰⁰ *Ušum* is the Sumerian equivalent of Bašmu. See 4.2.4 below.

There is a myth in which Tišpak seems to be a storm god and he overcomes a dragon known as *Labbu*. This *Labbu* has also been referred to as Bašmu and *mušhuššu*. *Labbu* is Akkadian for ‘lion’ but Wilson (2001:31) informs us that this dragon overcome by Tišpak is definitely referred to as a serpent as well. Perhaps the creature was a hybrid dragon of some sort. This myth is also recounted by Wiggerman (1992:159). In this version the god Enlil finds humankind too noisy. He commissions the *mušhuššu* to annihilate humankind. However, Tišpak defeats the *mušhuššu* and he brings about peace. This myth is designed to legitimise Tišpak as the successor of Ninazu in Ešnunna. By defeating the *mušhuššu* it becomes the symbol of Tišpak.

Tišpak’s ophidian aspects are emphasized in a Mesopotamian incantation against snakebite. The snake is described as ‘adorned like a reed, green like Tišpak, his snout runs to a point, his mouth is a ball of flame, his two tongues are like glaring light’ (Wilson 2001:32). Tišpak then clearly has ophidian attributes and this incantation compares the snake to Tišpak rather than Tišpak to the snake. This would suggest that Tišpak was perceived of in serpent form. A reference by Wiggerman (1992:151) to Tišpak as being green tends to support this.

4.2.4 *Mušhuššu* and Bašmu

Although the *mušhuššu* and Bašmu are not themselves healing deities they have been included here as they are often used to represent the healing deities (cf 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3). They both have a protective function in addition to this. Both serpent icons appear to be influenced by the Arabian horned viper *Cerastes gasperetti*. This snake is described as ‘bad-tempered’ and it is certainly venomous (Mattison 2007:219).



Figure 27: Arabian horned viper¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Picture of *Cerastes gasperetti* with kind permission of Dr Tony Phelps.

Mušhuššu was the Babylonian serpent-dragon. Perhaps its most renowned manifestation is from the Ištar Gate at Babylon. *Mušhuššu* had the head of a horned adder and a scaly neck and serpentine body. It had the forelegs and paws of a lion, whilst the hind legs and feet were those of a raptor. After the Babylonians conquered Ešnunna the *mušhuššu* transferred from Tišpak to Marduk and subsequently to Nabû (Black & Green 2008:129) and finally to the god Assur once the Babylonians were conquered by the Assyrians. The *mušhuššu* was used on *kudurrus* (Mesopotamian boundary stones) to represent Marduk. *Mušhuššu* was originally an underworld serpent as he was the vizier to Ninazu.

Bašmu appears to be very similar to the *mušhuššu* dragon but without the legs. He is definitely a venomous horned snake and corresponds with the Sumerian *ušum*. He became the symbol of a number of Mesopotamian deities and is particularly recognisable as the symbol of Ningizzida. Bašmu became the vizier of Tišpak, replacing the *mušhuššu* which had been taken over by Marduk when the Babylonians defeated Ešnunna. The deities that were associated with the *mušhuššu* became associated with Bašmu once the *mušhuššu* had been usurped by the Babylonian god Marduk. During the Assyrian era Bašmu was used as a protective figure (Black & Green 2008:168).

According to Wiggerman (1992:166) the Akkadian Bašmu appears to be equated with the Sumerian *ušum* and *muš-ša-tur*. He believes if *ušum* and *muš-ša-tur* are two snake forms then it is likely that Bašmu also represents two corresponding forms. *Muš-ša-tur* appears to be translated as ‘birth goddess snake’ according to Wiggerman (1992:168). The Sumerian *ušumgal* was derived from *ušum* and refers to a venomous snake (Akkadian = Bašmu). *Ušumgallu* seems to have been a generic term and could be used to refer to the *mušhuššu*. *Ušumgallu* was one of the devilish monsters spawned by Tiamat. Interestingly the epithet *ušum* was used in conjunction with the names of certain kings and deities (Wiggerman 1992:167). In my opinion this would no doubt have the effect of people perceiving these kings and gods as having a fearsome side to their personalities. It would perhaps extract more reverence from them.

4.2.4.1 The transfer of the *mušhuššu*

The transference of the *mušhuššu* from one deity to another can be simplified with the following diagram.

Table 4: Diagram to illustrate transfer of the *mušhuššu*

	1 →Tišpak	1 →Marduk	2 →Nabu	1 →Assur
Ninazu				
	2 →Ningizzida	2 →Nabu		

Key

1 = transfer by conquest of deity
2 = transfer by inheritance

4.2.5 Pazuzu

Pazuzu was a composite demon creature of Mesopotamian origin. Both the Assyrians and Babylonians of the first millennium BCE utilized him for exorcism and protection (Black & Green 2008:147). He had a lion's body covered with scales and four wings. His lower legs were like those of a raptor, with talons for feet. Ram horns lay flat against each side of his head (Amiet 1980:590). Pazuzu had a scorpion tail and his ophidian aspect was his serpent-headed phallus. He had an ugly fierce leonine face. The Assyrians would call upon Pazuzu to exorcise demons from the sick (Amiet 1980:590). Presumably his intense ugliness was enough to frighten off whatever demons had inhabited the body of the sufferer. His use in exorcism was his healing function.

4.2.6 Ea

The Akkadian god Ea was syncretised with the Sumerian Enki. They therefore have the same functions (Leick 1998:37). Ea was a creator god, a god of the subterranean sweet waters, of wisdom and of magic (Black & Green 2008:75). He is also an incantation specialist according to Leick (1998:37). His association with magic and incantations would seem to render him a healing deity or one that was appealed to for relief of suffering. Ea's name appears in a number of incantations used by magicians

for healing the sick (Thompson 1904:xxii-xxiii). In a Babylonian incantation he is referred to as ‘the great Prince Ea, lord of magic...’ (Thompson 1904:21).

Ea is generally portrayed in human form with streams of water emanating from his shoulders (Black & Green 2008:75). His serpent association is not well known. None of his symbols¹⁰² seem to indicate an ophidian side to his nature. However, we only have to turn to Thompson (1904:149) to find that Ea has a sea-monster form. This monster form, according to the Babylonian tablet known as *DD*, is called *Sassu-urinnu* and has a serpent head (Thompson 1904:147). In addition Ea has a second monster form called *Laḫmu-ippiru*. Morris & Morris (1965:46) also comment on the fact that Ea sometimes had serpent attributes. He is a ‘King of the Deep’ according to the Babylonian *Utukki limnuti* Tablet III (Thompson 1904: 25 & 27). This reference to having a sea monster form and being an entity of the deep reminds us immediately of the Syro-Palestinian serpent monsters associated with water such as Leviathan, Yam, Rahab and Tannin (cf section 3.3.2 in Chapter Three). He reminds us, too of Tiamat in this regard. Frothingham (1916:186) makes reference to a fragment of a cuneiform text that mentions Ea having a serpent head.

4.2.7 Marduk

Marduk was the patron deity of Babylon. He is most known through the *Enuma Eliš* and the role he played in defeating Tiamat and her brood of monsters. In addition Marduk was a healing god and was also associated with magic and wisdom (Leick 1998:116). In a Babylonian incantation in *Utukki limnuti* Tablet B he is referred to as ‘Marduk, magician of heaven and earth’ (Thompson 1904:133).

The worship and belief in Marduk is very old and his origins are not clear but he may stem from early Sumerian times (Leick 1998:115). He was considered to be a son of Ea, lord of healing and magic. By the Neo-Babylonian era Marduk had become head of the Babylonian pantheon. Marduk was the father of Nabu (Black & Green 2008:128/Leick 1998:116)) and the brother of Ištar (Leick 1998:116), both of whom have serpent links. Marduk’s totem animal was the *mušhuššu* which often represented

¹⁰² Ea’s symbols are listed as the goat-fish, a turtle and a curved staff topped by a ram’s head (Black & Green 2008:75).

him on *kudurrus* (boundary stones). His symbol was a tool shaped like a spade or a hoe which suggests an agricultural association or even origin. This is reminiscent of the cylinder seals depicting serpent gods Tišpak and Ninazu with ploughs (Wiggerman 1997:38-39).

4.2.7.1 *Marduk as a healing deity*

Marduk features in a large number of incantations and prayers associated with healing. It is evident from Babylonian prayers and incantations that Ea and Marduk were believed to provide support for the exorcists. A Babylonian prayer against evil spirits in *Utukki limnuti* Tablet III reads as follows: ‘The messenger of Marduk am I, my spell is the spell of Ea, my incantation is the incantation of Marduk...’ (Thompson 1904:23). The exorcist infers that he is sent by Marduk and that his spells and incantations are not really his, but those of higher powers. He suggests that he acts in the name of those higher powers, namely Marduk and Ea.

The Sumerian god of incantations was Asarluhi, who was absorbed into Marduk (Black & Green 2008:128), hence Marduk’s link to incantations associated with magic. In his healing capacity Marduk only had to look upon a sufferer in order for him to be healed. Scurlock & Andersen (2005:118) describe how Marduk set eyes upon a man suffering from gas in the intestines and the man was healed. Like most deities he was believed to be the instigator of certain afflictions. Examples given by Scurlock & Andersen include skin lesions (2005:455), chest pains and plague (2005:459). Marduk could be appealed to in a difficult childbirth situation (2005:730). Angina triggered by stress and unhealthy eating was attributed to the anger of Marduk (2005:169). Marduk was turned to for healing of those who had ingested too much belladonna accidentally (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:355-356). The sickness from over ingestion was attributed to Marduk himself and his representative demons.

4.2.8 **Gula-Bau**

Gula-Bau is most well known as a goddess of healing whose representative animal is the dog. She is often depicted with her dog seated at her side. There is a cylinder seal dating to approximately 2500 BCE from Iran that shows two deities seated opposite each other with a tree between them (see Figure 28 below) (Johnson 1981:185).

Behind each seated deity rises a serpent. The horned god on the right is Dumuzi. Johnson (1981:184) believes that the goddess on the left is Gula-Bau. Baring & Cashford (1993:212) would seem to suggest that this is rather Inanna and Dumuzi.



Figure 28: Deities flanked by serpent, cylinder seal c2500 BCE, Iran¹⁰³

The evidence linking this goddess to serpents based on the above seal does not appear to be very strong. However, Black & Green (2008:101) inform us that she was considered to be the mother of the healing god Ninazu (cf 4.2.2 above) who we know to be an ophidian deity.¹⁰⁴

4.2.8.1 Unravelling Gula-Bau

The Babylonian Gula-Bau was known to the Sumerians as Ninisina, an important healing deity at Isin (Leick 1998:132-133). Ninisina's son and occasional consort was Damu, also a healing deity who was sometimes identified with Ningizzida, perhaps his son. Avalos (1995:105) lists Damu as the son of Gula-Bau. This seems to equate Ninisina and Gula-Bau with each other.

Toward the end of the Babylonian period a Sumerian goddess named Baba also became identified with the healing goddess Ninisina (Leick 1998:23). She was a part of the pantheon of Lagaš and she was also worshipped at a temple in Uruk. Black & Green (2008:39) mention Bau worshipped at Lagaš and Girsu. They discuss her consort as being Ningirsu and that the correct form of her name may be Baba. They also identify Bau/Baba with the healing goddesses Gula and Ninisina (Black & Green 2008:101). From Van Buren (1934:77) we are informed that Ningizzida was worshipped at Bau's temple.

¹⁰³ © Trustees of the British Museum.

¹⁰⁴ In a different tradition in 4.2.2 Eriškigal is the mother of Ninazu.

It would appear that Gula, Bau, Baba and Ninisina are one and the same goddess of healing and are linked to the serpent gods of healing, Ninazu and Ningizzida. In fact Avalos (1995:101-102) informs us that by the Old Babylonian period Gula, Bau, Ninisina, Ninkarrak and Nintinugga had all merged into one goddess whose totem animal was the dog.

4.2.8.2 Gula-Bau as a healing deity

Like most Mesopotamian deities Gula-Bau could cause illness and suffering. Scurlock & Andersen give references to Gula, Bau and Ninisina as separate entities. Bau was believed to be responsible for septic shock (2005:352-3), neurological trauma resulting in paralysis, and strokes (2005:628). Abdominal wounds (2005:616) and skin lesions (2005:665) were also part of the inflictions for which she was responsible. The invoking of Gula in curses demonstrates the belief that she could bestow suffering. For example: ‘may Gula cause to come out on his body a dangerous and persistent sore’.¹⁰⁵ She was possibly linked to shingles and believed to be the cause of illness in infants (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:227,509). Ninisina appears to have been linked to childbirth according to Scurlock & Andersen (2005:263).

Gula-Bau was often an intermediary in healing (Avalos 1995:189) and sufferers could implore the goddess to intercede on their behalfs with the god that was believed to be responsible for the suffering. She often worked in conjunction with Marduk and Ea in their capacities as healing gods (Avalos 1995:114). Gula-Bau was appealed to for the alleviating of headaches, toothache and intestinal problems. She was also called upon to protect infants from Lamaštu (cf 3.4.1.2).

4.2.9 Šahan

Šahan is an almost unknown Babylonian serpent goddess. It would appear that she was replaced by Anat at Beth-Shan in Syria-Palestine. According to Randolph Joines (1938:121) Šahan was a bringer of life, well-being and holiness. Vincent (1928) believes that Beth-Shan derives its name from her (in Randolph Joines 1938:121). This is also suggested by Cook (1930:98) as being a possibility.

¹⁰⁵ Scurlock & Andersen (2005:216).

4.2.10 Inanna and Ištar

The Sumerian Bronze Age goddess Inanna is most well known as the Queen of Heaven and Earth. Leick (1998:87) explains that the Babylonian goddess Ištar was syncretised with Inanna in order for her to become more acceptable. They are therefore very similar in many respects. What is not immediately obvious is their role in healing. However it stands to reason that as they brought about suffering (cf Chapter Three) they would have been appealed to for alleviation of suffering.

4.2.10.1 Inanna, Ištar and the caduceus

The serpent links of Inanna and Ištar are not immediately apparent. They are clearly not ophidian deities but they do have serpent associations. The caduceus appears to be one of their symbols.

In the cylinder seal image below (right) Inanna stands upon her feline symbols. In her right hand she holds the twisted serpents forming the caduceus. In the image of Ištar (left) she stands upon two dragons and also holds the caduceus in her right hand.



Figure 29: Ištar (right) and the caduceus¹⁰⁶



Figure 30: Inanna holding the caduceus¹⁰⁷

Langdon in Baring & Cashford (1993:695) believed that the symbol that was used to write the names of both Inanna and Ištar was in fact intended to be the caduceus. This links both of these goddesses to the serpent symbol. It is not clear in which capacity they acted when using this symbol but Baring & Cashford (1993:191) imply that it may be in the role of mother goddess. Leick (1998: 86) however informs us that the

¹⁰⁶ Cylinder seal from the British Museum, c. 2500 – 2000 BCE (Ward 1898:96).

¹⁰⁷ A cylinder seal c. 1850-1700 BCE (Baring & Cashford 1993:192).

sign representing Inanna's name was a rolled up reed stalk called *muš*. This is interesting as *muš* appears as a prefix for various words that are linked to snakes.¹⁰⁸

Examples are:

- *Muš-la-la-ah-hu* (snake charmer, exorcist specialising in snakes).
- *Mušlah* (snake charmer, exorcist specialising in snakes).
- *Mušhuššu* (snake-dragon).
- *Muš-mah* (grand serpent).
- *Muš-huš* (furious snake).

Langdon may well be correct in his assessment of the symbol being a representation of the caduceus. The caduceus is known to be a symbol of Ningizzida, the serpent deity of healing (cf section 4.2.1). It may therefore also indicate that Inanna and Ištar had a healing capacity even though it may not have been their primary function.

The *muš* glyph below (Mundkur 1983:27) represents the snake and variations of this basic form of the glyph are used in cuneiform words concerning snakes (see examples given above). It does indeed resemble the caduceus in its most simplified form.



Figure 31: The *muš* glyph

4.2.10.2 Inanna and further serpent associations

In some representations of Inanna she has maces or spring buds emanating from her shoulders. Sometimes, say Baring & Cashford (1993:175) these are replaced by serpents and this indicates her link to serpent goddesses of the Neolithic era.

Inanna was associated with vegetative fertility. She was a giver of life and fertility and equally she could take it away. The viper, according to Baring & Cashford

¹⁰⁸ McDonald (1989:26) makes reference to a list transcribed by Landsberger (1934) in which there are forty six serpents mentioned, some of which are composite. The names all begin with 'muš'.

(1993:193) was a symbol of this latter function. This viper along with her serpent symbols connected her to underworld. In mythology Inanna disappears into the underworld to rescue Dumuzi, a vegetative deity. Inanna's role as a goddess of wisdom comes from her chthonic aspect where she is linked to the 'serpent wisdom of the underworld' (Baring & Cashford 1993:205).

Dumuzi, who was Inanna's lover/son, was also the consort of Nammu.¹⁰⁹ He was occasionally depicted with snakes emanating from his shoulders or even with snakes wrapped around his legs. The caduceus could also be used as one of his symbols. In the Babylonian version of this myth Inanna is replaced by Ištar whilst Dumuzi is represented by Tammuz.

Inanna did have a destructive side to her nature. This facet of her personality arose in the form of storms which could destroy cultivation. Baring & Cashford (1993:201) inform us that in this role she stood upon a dragon from whose mouth venom flowed. Perhaps the venom represents destruction or devastation. In a Babylonian incantation regarding disease that has been cast upon the land it is mentioned that Ištar 'hath filled the man with venom' (Thompson 1903:211). This imagery makes us think instantly of serpents.

The serpent is very much linked to Inanna through the caduceus, the viper and the underworld. Ištar's link is through the caduceus. She is also the sister of Transtigridian serpent deity, Išaran. If Inanna is somehow linked to Gula-Bau then her healing connection is very strong.

4.2.11 Nergal

Nergal had links to healing despite the fact that he seems to be most well known as a bringer of pestilence and disease. Considering the perception that the ancient Mesopotamians had of deities as the bringers of suffering, logically we can place any Mesopotamian deity in the same category as Nergal.

¹⁰⁹ Nammu may have been synonymous with Tiamat or Tiamat may have been a later form of Nammu (Baring & Cashford 1993:185).

This deity is mentioned in a Babylonian incantation by an exorcist as being at his right hand. He is there to support the exorcist in his banishment of evil spirits.¹¹⁰ In the *Bīt mēseri* incantations is a Babylonian incantation and ritual to exorcise a house of sickness, which prescribes the manufacture of a figurine of the deity Nergal. The figure of Nergal is placed in the bedroom of the sick man (Wiggerman 1992:110).

4.2.12 Damu

Damu was a Sumerian god of healing. He was believed to be the son of the healing goddess Ninisina (cf 4.2.8 above) and Ningizzida. Scurlock & Andersen (2005:479) mention that he may even have been the same as Ningizzida. This pedigree gives him serpent connections. Both Ningizzida and Damu were sent to the underworld and appear to have fertility and agricultural connections. From laments we learn that he filled a role similar to that of Dumuzi/Tammuz (Leick 1998:30). Like most Mesopotamian deities connected to healing Damu could also cause suffering. Wounds with abdominal complications and haemorrhagic shock are both attributed to him (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:479, 632). Damu was worshipped at centres such as Isin, Larsa and Ur. It is possible he was also worshipped at Girsu which was one of Ningizzida's primary centres (Black & Green 2008:57).

4.2.13 Healing serpent family trees

There appears to be a familial relationship between certain deities that are connected to the serpent and healing. It is suggestive of serpent deity families. These family relationships can be illustrated by the following diagrams:

Table 5: Diagrams to illustrate serpent family trees

Key to symbols

- Represents spouse
- ↓ Represents offspring
- Represents sibling relationship

¹¹⁰ See Thompson (1904:15-17) for the incantation against evil spirits from *Utukki limnuti* Tablet III.

The Ningizzida tree:

Ninisina OR Gula-Bau OR Eriškigal – Nergal



Ninazu – Eriškigal OR Ninisina



Ninisina – Ningizzida – Geštianna



Damu



Damu

The Ea tree:

Ea



Marduk → Ištar → Ištaran

4.2.14 Comparison between the different Mesopotamian serpents of healing and well-being

Table 6: The Mesopotamian serpents of healing

Key to abbreviations

Meso: Mesopotamia

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	Gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Serpent aspect	Serpent association	Demonised	Uses serpent symbol	Chthonic	Vegetative or agricultural
Ningizzida	Meso	M	X					X	X	X
Ninanzu	Meso	M	X					X	X	X
Ipa'um	Meso	M	X						X	
Tišpak	Meso	M	X					X	X	X
<i>Mušhuššu</i>	Meso	M		X					X	
<i>Bašmu</i>	Meso	M		X					X	
Pazuzu	Meso	M			X		X			
Ea	Meso	M			X					
Marduk	Meso	M				X		X		X
Gula-Bau	Meso	F				X				
Ninisina	Meso	F				X				
Baba	Meso	F				X				
Inanna	Meso	F			X	X		X	X	X
Ištar	Meso	F				X		X	X	X
Nergal	Meso	M				X		X	X	
Damu	Meso	M				X			X	X
Šahan	Meso	M/F	X						X	

- Deified serpents are all male as are the serpent hybrids.
- The female deities do not appear to be deified serpents but rather goddesses with serpent aspects or associations.
- Certain deities have a dual nature. In other words they appear on the table of serpents that cause mischief or ill health in addition to the table above. These are Ištar, Ea, Ningizzida and Nergal. Damu can be included here.
- All the serpents on the above table that are chthonic are also associated with vegetation or agriculture except for Nergal. These entities are either deified or are serpent hybrids. This seems to suggest a link between agricultural and the cyclical nature of the seasons and the underworld. The serpent is the ideal representative of this cyclical seasonal nature as they disappear into the ground.
- The ones that are not chthonic have either a serpent aspect or association.
- Those that use a serpent symbol tend to have a vegetation or agricultural connection. The exception is Nergal.
- The sloughing of the snake's skin can be likened to the deciduous nature of many plants. This may be why snakes have a vegetative and

agricultural connection. The perceived renewal through moulting can also be likened to the sick individual becoming well again. Snakes hibernate in winter (Mattison 2007:34) and therefore tend to go underground. They disappear just like the chthonic deities of vegetation. They re-appear in spring and this is when they usually shed their skins to reveal a shiny new outer layer. Spring is also the time when vegetation comes back to life and is renewed. Healing can be seen as a form of renewal and the serpent, therefore, is a good representative of healing and renewal. From Frothingham (1916:191) we learn that the second month of spring was the sacred month of the god Ningizzida and that spring was indeed considered the time of renewal.

- The interconnectedness between the serpent deities and those with serpent aspects and associations can be illustrated by means of family tree diagrams. Healing serpent associations seem to run in families.

4.3 HEALING SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

In comparison with Mesopotamia there appear to be very few serpent entities associated with healing in ancient Egypt.

4.3.1 Isis

The origins of Isis are obscure. Watterson (1999:72) suggests that she may have originally been a fetish goddess from the Delta region. Isis has merged with many goddesses including the cobra goddess Renenutet (Thermuthis). She has also merged occasionally with the cobra goddess Wadjet (Baring & Cashford 1993:246). Temples to Isis existed all over ancient Egypt. Examples are the Iseum at Denderah and the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae.¹¹¹ Isis is very much a goddess of magic (Watterson 1999:74) and of healing (Brier 2001:56). Griffiths (2003:172) echoes these comments of Watterson and Brier in saying that Isis was a goddess associated with magical powers, particularly with regards to healing. Isis was a goddess of

¹¹¹ The temple was removed and reconstructed on Agilkia Island in modern times to preserve it from rising water of the Aswan Dam (Watterson 1999:73).

nurturing and well-being often shown nursing the infant Horus. I believe that Renenutet¹¹², with whom she eventually merged, could be portrayed in the same light.



Figure 32: Isis suckling infant¹¹³



Figure 33: Renenutet suckling infant¹¹⁴

It is interesting to compare these two pictures. Renenutet is seen in the typical pose of Isis nurturing an infant. Also interesting to note in the picture with Isis are the female figures on the extreme left and right of the picture. Each one holds a serpent staff. The goddess holding the staff on the left seems to be Wadjet (Budge 1969:442, Vol I) and the one on the right is Nekhbet (Budge 1969:439, Vol I). It is not clear what the significance is but the scene is one of nurturing and caring and of providing well-being. They may well be symbols of Isis, her magical serpent staffs. They are reminiscent of the caduceus held by the Mesopotamian Ištār and Inanna. Isis is in effect flanked by serpent staffs and a similar image concept appears much later on a 1st century BCE Egyptian coin from the Hellenistic era where Isis appears flanked by two serpents (Baring & Cashford 1993:271).



Figure 34: Isis with serpents on 1st century BCE Egyptian coin¹¹⁵

¹¹² Renenutet was a cobra goddess of the harvest, nourishment and well-being. She is also referred to as Rennut or Renenit.

¹¹³ Budge (1969, Vol II).

¹¹⁴ Budge (1969:214, Vol II).

¹¹⁵ Baring & Cashford (1993:271).

Another interesting comparison between the goddesses Isis and Renenutet suckling infants can be made with the figurine of a snake-headed goddess nurturing an infant in the picture below. This figurine was found at Ur in Mesopotamia.



Figure 35: Serpent-headed Madonna from Ur¹¹⁶

A very important piece of information is supplied by Budge (1971:59) in that he refers to Isis as a great snake goddess. Indeed red snake head amulets interred with the deceased are believed to represent the magical powers of Isis. From Johnson (1981:134-135) we learn of a bronze head of Isis which dates to approximately 1570 BCE. Upon the head of the goddess is a crown with a pair of cow horns. Twisting themselves around the cow horns are two serpents. Baring & Cashford (1993:225) refer to Isis as a goddess of serpents of the primeval waters. Johnson (1981:135) believes that Isis is surrounded by serpent symbols but that very little of this symbolism actually filters into mythology where the goddess is concerned. The serpent aspect of Isis emerges in a statue of the Graeco-Roman period from Dendera. Two children stand within the coils of two snakes which are thought to be Isis-Thermouthis and Serapis-Agathos Daimon (Abdalla 1991:189). In the later Roman period Isis was sometimes represented as a serpent (Griffiths 2003:171). It is also mentioned by Cook (1930:99) that Isis was serpent-bodied. This suggests that the serpent aspect of Isis was always present despite its lack of manifestation in mythology.

¹¹⁶ Figurine from Ur in Mesopotamia dating to approximately the 4th millennium BCE (Johnson (1981:137).

4.3.1.1 *The healing abilities of Isis*

The magical ability of Isis to create snakes and heal the venomous bite is well demonstrated in the myth of Isis and Re. In this myth we see her in the roles of magician and healer. Budge (1971:137) tells us that she creates a sacred serpent from the saliva of Re and earth. The aim of her plan was to trick Re into revealing to her his sacred name. She lays the snake upon the ground, continues Budge (1971:137). It bites him and as it is venomous Re begins to suffer with immense pain. Life begins to ebb from him. Budge (1971:139) tells us that the deities, including Isis, rush to Re's aid. Isis brings her magical skills which include words of power and amulets. Her words are described as being able to lift pain and sickness. She guarantees that she can cure Re from the effects of the snake venom in exchange for his secret name (Budge 1971:140).

Eventually Re divulges the secret name to her. Isis says 'depart, poison, go forth from Ra. O eye of Horus, go forth from the god and shine outside his mouth. It is I who work, it is I who make to fall down upon the earth the vanquished poison' (Budge 1967:xc). This giving up of the secret name to Isis makes her a very powerful goddess. According to Baring & Cashford (1993:265) the serpent in this myth represents the 'active power' of Isis. Her magical power in this myth relates to her ability to create the problem and her ability to heal the damage caused.

The ability of Isis to heal the effects of venom is also demonstrated in the myth concerning Horus whereby he is stung by a scorpion. Baring & Cashford (1993:266) relay that according to the myth Horus was born in the Delta swamps, a place of venomous creatures such as snakes and scorpions. Isis leaves Horus in order to search for food and while she is away he gets stung by a scorpion. On her return she finds him weak and gravely ill. She is able to cure him with her magic words (Baring & Cashford 1993:266-267). In another version of the story relayed by Watterson (1999:78) Isis needs assistance in healing Horus and both Nephthys and Selqet come to her aid. This is interesting as both Selqet and Nephthys have serpent connections. (cf 4.3.2 below on Selqet, and 6.3.4 on both Nephthys and Selqet).

Another story of the healing powers of Isis is recounted by Watterson (1999:74) from Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*. The queen of Byblos sent for Isis who had disguised

herself as an old woman. The queen discovered that the old woman was an Egyptian. She knew, according to Watterson (1999:75), that Egyptians were well acquainted with the magical healing arts. The queen's baby son was ill and she entrusted him to the old woman. Isis performed magic and surrounded the child with a ring of fire. However, continues Watterson (1999:75-76), the queen was terrified and went to save the child from the fire. As she had not trusted Isis the healing spell was broken and the child was doomed to mortality and death. The moral of this story seems to be that one should trust in the ability of Isis to heal.

4.3.2 Selqet (Serqet, Selkis, Selket)

Selqet was a very old Egyptian goddess known from the beginning of Old Kingdom times. She was depicted in human form, generally with a scorpion upon her head (Nunn 2002:42). Selqet is often referred to as a scorpion goddess but there are also references to her as a snake goddess. The *Brooklyn Papyrus* dealing with snakes and snake bite is a handbook intended for the priests of Selqet (Nunn: 2002:100). These priests of Selqet were often employed by the state on various projects such as mining expeditions where the threat of snake bite was a real hazard (Ritner 2003a:195, Ritner 2003b:199). Selqet was therefore the patron goddess of priests involved in healing snake bites. These priests of Selqet specialised in dealing with snake bites and scorpion stings (Nunn 2002:100).

4.3.3 Neith

The cult of Neith predates the first Dynasty of Egypt (Johnson 1981:132). According to Watterson (1999:179) her cult centre was at Sais in the Delta region. Budge (1972:59) says she may have been a goddess of magic and perhaps even a cow goddess as she was identified with Hathor and Isis. Johnson (1981:132) informs us that she was a goddess of magic, the loom and of weaving. Neith could appear in cobra form and as such she was a goddess of life and of fate (Johnson (1981:172). The weaving shuttle appears upon her chest as is shown in the illustration below.



Figure 36: Neith in her cobra form¹¹⁷

Pinch (2006:101) mentions that Neith's temple at Sais was well known for its doctors. This is an interesting point as it seems to combine a serpent deity with healing.

4.3.4 Comparison between the different Egyptian serpents of healing and well-being

Table 7: The Egyptian serpents of healing

Key to abbreviations

Egy: Egypt

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	Gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Serpent aspect	Serpent association	Demonised	Uses serpent symbol	Chthonic	Vegetative or agricultural
Isis	Egy	F			X	X		X		
Selqet	Egy	F			X	X				
Neith	Egy	F	X							

- All of the deities on the above Table are female.
- None of them are chthonic or specifically have vegetation or agricultural links. Isis did have an agricultural connection but this was

¹¹⁷ The image comes from the tomb of Tutankamun and dates to approximately 1325 BCE (Johnson 1981:132).

in the Late Period when merged with the harvest cobra goddess Renenutet.

- Of the three goddesses listed above, only Neith is a true serpent deity. The other two have serpent associations. Isis has a serpent aspect and Selqet is suspected of having a serpent aspect. Although Selqet has been termed a serpent goddess I have not been able to find concrete proof of this thus far. The existence of the *Brooklyn Papyrus*, being the snake bite manual for the priests of Selqet strongly suggests that she was a snake goddess.
- The Isis myth in which the goddess creates a poisonous snake to bite Re and her capacity to heal demonstrates a concept akin with that of the Mesopotamians. In other words, a deity is capable of bestowing an illness and also of removing it.
- All three of the above listed deities are linked to magic. Isis and Neith are known to be goddesses of magic and Selqet is linked to the priest-healers who often employed apotropaic magic in their healing activities. Selqet was a patron of priest-healers.

4.4 HEALING SERPENTS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE

The naked Syrian goddess figure is often depicted standing on the back of a lion, and with outstretched arms she grasps lotus blooms or serpents. This goddess has been linked to fertility. Wood (1916:248) mentions the serpent being sacred to some forms of the Semitic mother goddess. I suggest that she was also linked to healing through serpent symbols and the lotus. Concrete evidence of the Syro-Palestinian deities as healing deities is hard to find and circumstantial at best, but I believe that the clues are there. In my opinion the location of Syria-Palestine between Egypt and Mesopotamia led to influences filtering into the region that cannot be ignored when investigating the Syro-Palestinian deities of healing. The lack of inscriptions and texts when compared to Egypt and Mesopotamia makes hard and fast evidence difficult to provide, but I believe that the suggestions are worth making.

4.4.1 Nehuštān

The noun נחש (nahash)¹¹⁸ means ‘serpent’ (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2010:638). נחשת (nehoshet) means ‘copper/bronze’ (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2010:638). נחשתן (nahushtan) refers to the serpent made of bronze according to Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:639). It can also refer to an item made of copper or bronze. As a verb נחש means to practice divination and to observe signs (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2010:638). Perhaps it is this meaning of the verb that causes Wilson (2001:67) to comment that נחש can also have a reference to magic.

4.4.1.1 *The bronze serpent and Moses*

According to the Hebrew Bible the Israelites set out from Mount Hor to go to Edom via the Red Sea. On the way they became impatient and began to complain about their god and Moses. They complained about being brought from Egypt into a wilderness with no food and water. Numbers 21:6-9 tells us that their god retaliated against the complaint by sending fiery serpents which bit the Israelites. Many people succumbed to the venomous bites. The people realised their error and pleaded with Moses to intercede on their behalfs with their god and request that he remove the venomous snakes. Accordingly Moses prayed to his god and his god instructed him to do the following: ‘make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live’ (Numbers 21:8) and so Moses made a serpent from bronze and he fixed it onto a pole. In this form the serpent was an amulet designed to heal those who had been bitten. Koh (1994:11) suggests that the story of Moses and the bronze serpent was constructed in order to legitimise the Canaanite serpent cult. Although Koh does not say why the Moses story was constructed I think that it may possibly have been that the serpent cult was quite entrenched in Canaanite culture, and that linking Moses to it made it more acceptable to the Israelite people.

Furthermore 2 Kings 18:4 tells us that Hezekiah ‘broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it; it was called Nehuštān.’ This bronze serpent destroyed by Hezekiah resided in the Temple of Jerusalem. Moses was believed to have lived during the Late Bronze Age.

¹¹⁸ For examples of the use of the word נחש in the Hebrew Bible refer to Randolph Joines (1938:2-3) and Wilson (2001:65-88).

Hezekiah ruled from approximately 715 to 687 BCE (Randolph Joines 1938:61) during the Iron Age. Therefore the bronze serpent was worshipped by the proto-Israelites for at least 400 to 600 years if we take the Biblical dating into account. It may well have been worshipped for longer. If we cast our minds back to Chapter Two (cf 2.4.3.4) we recall the comment of Meek (1960:122) that the Levites most likely worshipped a god called Nahaš. This may be due to Moses setting up the bronze serpent upon the pole. That the Levites originally worshipped a god called Nahaš is also the opinion of Goldziher (1967:226) who mentions that the Levites referred to themselves as ‘Sons of the Serpent’. Meek (1960:129) also suggests that the Levites (of which Moses was one) were likely to have been viewed by neighbouring tribes as medicine men. I think that the story of Moses and the bronze serpent seems designed to legitimise the serpent cult in the Israelite cult of Yahweh. An interesting point is raised by Binger (1997:109), namely that one does not worship the symbol of the deity, but rather the deity represented by the symbol. So, for example, I think that the Nehušan symbol in all likelihood represented the deity Nahaš.

What we can conclude thus far about Nehušan is the following:

According to the Biblical narrative, Nehušan was a serpent made of bronze affixed atop a pole. It appears to be the symbol for a serpent god Nahaš (see Meek 1960:122). Some scholars perceive the Levites as medicine men and healers and their god was Nahaš. This is contradictory with the traditions recorded in the Hebrew Bible regarding the Levites and their origins. Nehušan was possibly a symbol for healing, rather like the Mesopotamian caduceus. The serpent god was worshipped for a period of time and an image of this deity was present at the Temple in Jerusalem.

4.4.1.2 The bronze serpent as a symbol of healing

By and large the serpent symbol in Syria-Palestine appears to be linked with fertility and mother goddess figures. However I suggest that it also represents healing based on the following. It is possible that the Levites were medicine men as suggested by Meek (1960:129). In the story of Moses in Numbers 21, Nehušan is clearly an emblem of healing. I believe that the story is designed to legitimise the existence of the bronze serpent in the Jerusalem Temple and it is specifically a healing serpent. This point is also raised by Randolph Joines (1938:90). She mentions that scholars such as Rowley and Baudissin believe this to have been the case. Numbers 21 enables

the role of the serpent to maintain a position in Israelite society that was adopted from the Canaanites. Nehuštan resembles the concept of the Mesopotamian caduceus (cf 4.2.1). In this manner Nehuštan could have been to a Canaanite serpent healing deity what the caduceus was to Ningizzida. Therefore Nehuštan is probably a caduceus, the serpent symbol of healing.

4.4.1.3 The Mesopotamian influence

Randolph Joines (1938:87) believes that the caduceus signifies fertility but concedes that it also represents health. We have clearly seen the caduceus linked to Mesopotamian deities associated with healing such as Ningizzida, Inanna and Ištar. According to Randolph Joines (1938:98-99) the serpent symbol on pottery and in bronze began to extend west towards Syria-Palestine during the Middle Bronze Age and consequently it became fairly common in the region. By the Late Bronze Age Mesopotamian serpent symbolism extended to Ugarit and as far as Egypt. Indeed Cook (1930:54) suggests that the representation of the Mesopotamian Ningizzida on the libation cup of Gudea may be the prototype for Nehuštan. Included in this Mesopotamian influence would no doubt be the caduceus. Figures such as Inanna and Ištar standing upon their lion holding the caduceus may well have influenced the idea of the bronze serpent of Moses. No doubt there are other factors to consider such as the independent existence of a Canaanite serpent cult. I am merely suggesting that the idea of Nehuštan as a symbol of healing may have transferred from Mesopotamia during the Middle to Late Bronze Ages. According to Wilson (2001:75) Nehuštan became the influence for the staff of the Greek healing god Asclepius.



Figure 37: Asclepius and his serpent staff¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2010) at the Epidaurus Museum, Greece.

4.4.1.4 Egyptian influence

The worship of a healing serpent in Syria-Palestine is similar to the worship of the Egyptian cobra goddess Meretseger (cf 6.3.6 in Chapter Six) who was appeased by the New Kingdom workers of Deir el-Medina in order to avoid being bitten by snakes and to be healed if one was actually bitten. How much influence regarding serpents and healing comes from Egypt is not clear. There may be no influence in this regard at all as the Egyptians tended to use the serpent symbol predominantly as a symbol of royalty and protection.

4.4.1.5 The Hazor figurine

A bronze serpent of 7.3 cm was found at Hazor. Koh (1994:71) mentions an interesting aspect of this artefact. It has a split in its tail with a hole. Koh believes that this allows it to be placed on a staff. A find of this nature adds more realism to the bronze serpent in the Moses story.

4.4.2 Ašerah

Ašerah was a Canaanite mother goddess and believed to be the mother of the goddess Anat, and in the Baal myths she was the wife of El (Patai 1965:38). According to Ugaritic texts of the 14th century BCE, and in popular Israelite religion she was the consort of Yahweh before her cult was banned by Hezekiah and the priests of Yahweh. It is possible that she became the consort of Yahweh when he assimilated with El (Baring & Cashford 1993:454). She was worshipped in locations such as Sidon and Tyre in the Late Bronze Age (Baring & Cashford 1993:456). It is maintained by Wilson (2001:9) that the identity of Ašerah is difficult to establish and is often debated. Yamashita (1985:1) whose PhD thesis is based on Ašerah says that documents pertaining directly to her are not common. It stands to reason that a degree of speculation regarding the goddess is likely. It is not my aim to give her a definite identity but only to present views where there is relevance to establishing links to serpents and healing. Scholars have varied opinions, a couple of which shall be presented below.

4.4.2.1 Ašerah's serpent aspect

Wallace (1985:156) says that according to F. M. Cross, Ašerah was often referred to as the 'lady of the serpent'. Ašerah had an ophidian character writes Wilson (2001:9)

which he believes became assimilated in ancient Israel. He also mentions (2001:95) that one of her epithets was ‘serpent lady’ and that the horned snake was associated with her (Wilson 2001:116-119). He submits proof of this association based on a 7th century BCE monumental inscription from Tel Mique-Ekron in which *pt(n)yh* translates to the ‘serpent of Yahweh’. Mundkur (1983:69) too comments that the primary symbol of Ašerah was serpentine. Soggin (in Wallace 1985:163) believes Ašerah to be a serpent goddess.

4.4.2.2 *Epithets and alignment with other goddesses*

In addition to ‘serpent lady’, one of Ašerah’s other epithets was ‘Lady of the Sea’. In this she is very similar to Astarte. Leick (1998:16) equates her with Astarte as the *ašerah* was the cult symbol of Astarte. Yamashita (1985:10) and Wilson (2001:91) write that both Ašerah and Ištar were referred to as the ‘Lady of the Steppe’ which seems to suggest some similarity between the two goddesses. The Babylonians were aware of Ašerah as she was mentioned in a Sumerian inscription dating to approximately 1750 BCE (Baring & Cashford 1993:454). Ašerah, it would appear, was most likely an Amorite goddess named Ašratu. Yamashita (1985:29) explains that she probably entered Syria-Palestine with the Amorites and was well entrenched as a prominent deity by the 15th century BCE. ‘Ašerah was sometimes known as ‘Elat, meaning ‘goddess’, says Patai (1965:38).

4.4.2.3 *Ašerah the pole*

According to Baring & Cashford (1993:454) Ašerah was considered to be a tree of life and was often represented by a carved wooden pole which was called an *ašerah*. This is interesting, really, as it is a pole around which the healing serpent deity is wound, or placed on top of, in Mesopotamia. Nehuštan, the Canaanite symbol of healing (cf 4.4.1), is also placed upon a pole. Indeed Wilson (2001:46) draws our attention to the important possibility that the iconography of Ašerah as a pole can be identified with the caduceus.

In this regard Negbi (in Wilson 2001:79) describes a representation of Ašerah standing upon a lion with a snake wrapped around her body. If we replace the human form of Ašerah with her wooden pole symbol and maintain the snake wrapped around the pole we end up with a caduceus. This in turn can be associated with the symbol of

healing. This representation of Ašerah described above standing upon a lion reminds us of Ištar standing upon her lion, and holding the caduceus in her right hand.

In his article 'The Asherah' Ward (1902) discusses the *ašerah* as a wooden pole used to represent a deity, and how the *ašerahs* of the various deities differ from one another. Ward (1902:33-44) provides many examples of *ašerahs* from Mesopotamia to Syria-Palestine. So a wooden pole to represent the goddess Ašerah is neither unusual nor exceptional. Wooden columns were used in Mesopotamia to represent deities such as Ištar, Ea, Marduk, Nabu, Sin and Šamaš (Ward 1902:36). Furthermore Ward (1902:42) believes that wooden columns to represent deities were just as familiar in Syria-Palestine as they were in Mesopotamia and therefore not specific to Ašerah.

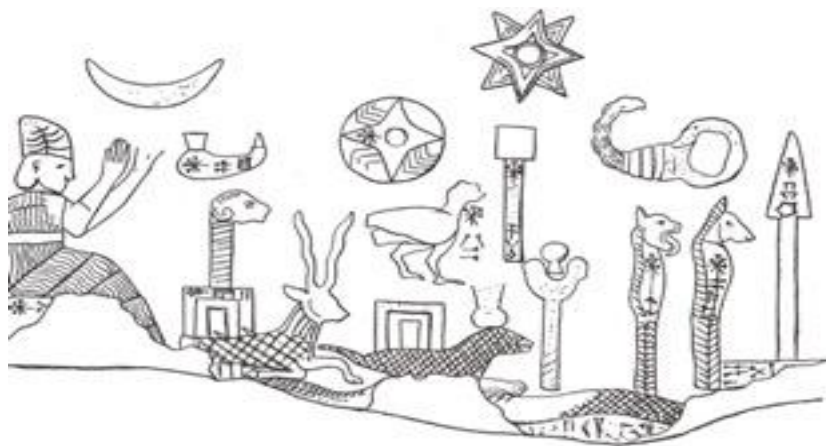


Figure 38: Various types of *ašerah* columns¹²⁰

4.4.3 Astarte

Astarte was a West Semitic goddess who was equated with the Biblical Ašerah (Leick 1998:16). The Hebrews called her Aštoreth. Baring & Cashford (1993:458) maintain that her cult was more widespread than that of Ašerah but they also mention that it is not certain whether or not Astarte, Ašerah and Anat were different goddesses or one and the same (Patai in Baring & Cashford 1993:458). Leick (1998:16) records Astarte as the wife of the Canaanite El and further informs us that the Babylonians knew her

¹²⁰ Drawing from a *kudurru* found at Susa (Ward 1902:41).

as Ašratu, wife of Amurru. Temples to Astarte existed in locations such as Sidon, Byblos, Askelon and Hieropolis.

4.4.3.1 Epithets and alignments of Astarte

Astarte was referred to as ‘Lady Ašerah of the Sea’ (Leick 1998:16). Another of her epithets was ‘Queen of Heaven’. This was also the epithet of a goddess named Qudšu. In addition this epithet was used for the Babylonian Inanna and Ištar with whom Baring & Cashford (1993:460) align Astarte through their common symbols of the moon, the morning, and the evening star. She was aligned with Isis in her assimilation with Hathor. Leick (1998:16) aligns her with Ašerah as she says the cult symbol of Astarte was the ‘*ašerah* pole.

4.4.3.2 Astarte’s serpent links

According to Mundkur (1983:187-188) Astarte had ophidian features and he mentions (1983:69) that the snake was one of her symbols. He describes a silver image of Astarte that had been found beneath a Canaanite temple that was dedicated to her in Nahariyeh in Israel. Mundkur (1983:188) also comments on Ashlar horned altars that were decorated with snake motifs and were part of the Astarte cult. It seems that the serpent was linked to holy waters which, Wood (1916:248) informs us, were sacred to Astarte. From 15th century BCE Ugarit comes a beautiful gold pendant of a goddess believed to be Astarte. She stands upon a lion and holds water a lily bloom in each hand. Crossing over each other across her waist are two serpents (Baring & Cashford 1993:459).¹²¹

4.4.4 Athirat

We learn of the Canaanite goddess Athirat through the Late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit, says Margalit (1990:271), who equates the Ugaritic Athirat, the Amorite Ašratum and the Hebrew Ašerah with each other. From these texts we glean information about Athirat. As a supreme goddess she is *ilt* and as a holy goddess she is *qdš* (Margalit 1990:271).

¹²¹ Johnson (1981:137) identifies the goddess as Anat and dates the pendant to the 13th century BCE.

4.4.5 Qudšu (Qetesh)

Although a Canaanite goddess, Qudšu was also revered in ancient Egypt. I have included her with the Syro-Palestinian deities as this is where her origins are, and not in Egypt. As mentioned by Baring & Cashford (1993:459) like Astarte she was referred to as a 'Queen of Heaven'. Qudšu was often depicted naked, standing on the back of a lion holding water lilies in one hand and snakes in the other (Baring & Cashford 1993:459). Often she was shown with the Egyptian god of fertility, Min and the Canaanite healing god, Rešeph (cf 4.4.11). It is pointed out by Hestrin (1987:218) that the water lilies tend to be carried on the side of Min and the snakes are carried on the side of Rešeph. This, I believe, is a very important point in establishing healing as one of the functions of the Syro-Palestinian goddess figures. The serpents occur on the side of the healing god. She is flanked by a fertility god and a healing god so she most likely serves both of these functions.

In Wilson (2001:95) Qudšu appears to be equated with Ašerah and both goddesses have the epithet 'serpent lady'. Yamashita (1985:117) mentions that both Albright and Edwards believed that Qudšu was Ašerah. He himself believes that although they are similar they may not be one and the same. Wilson (2001:194) suggests that the word 'caduceus' may stem from the Semitic *qdš*. Both these goddesses can now be compared to Ištar standing upon a lion.

4.4.5.1 *Qudšu, the holy one*

From Hestrin (1987:217-218) we glean the following information. Sixteen votive stelae were found near ancient Thebes and Memphis where Asiatic people apparently settled. Consequently the iconography of the stelae is believed to come from outside of Egypt. On every one of the votive stelae is depicted a naked goddess standing upon her lion and she holds either water lilies or snakes. Egyptian influences are found in her Hathor style hairstyle and the occasional appearance of the gods Min and Rešeph. Wilson (2001:102) explains that *qudšu* means 'holiness' and that this was one of Ašerah's epithets as well as one of Athirat's. Wallace (1985:157) citing textual evidence from Ugarit also believes *qdš* to be an epithet of Ašerah.

There are two schools of thought on Qudšu which are discussed briefly by Hestrin (1987:218). One is that *qudšu* is an adjective describing Astarte and Anat.¹²² The other is that Qudšu is the name of the goddess and that she is to be equated with Ašerah, Athirat and ‘Elat. Here Hestrin (1987:218) refers to Albright (1957:26) and Cross (1973:33-34).

4.4.6 ‘Elat (‘*lt*)

Wilson (2001:97) tells of a goddess mentioned by Cooke (1903:135-136) with the name of ‘*lt*. Her name was found in a Phoenician inscription where it appears to be equated with *hwt*. The feminine form of the god El is ‘*lt*. Therefore she would have to equate with Ašerah as the consort of El. It is mentioned by Wilson (2001:97) that Athirat was also known as ‘*lt*.

4.4.6.1 *The Lachish Ewer*

The Lachish Ewer¹²³ dates to the Late Bronze Age, approximately the late 13th century BCE, and was found by J. L. Starkey at Lachish (Hestrin 1987:212). Along with portrayals of trees and animals, the ewer bears an inscription. The translation of this inscription reads ‘*a gift to the great mistress ‘Elat*’ (Wilson 2001:108). He further mentions that the cultic symbol of ‘Elat was a tree. It is believed by Hestrin (1987:215) that the sacred trees on the ewer represent Ašerah based on evidence presented in other finds.¹²⁴ This would seem to align ‘Elat with Ašerah.

4.4.7 The generic Canaanite goddess ‘Elat

The issues regarding the individual identities and whether or not Ašerah, Astarte, Athirat and Qudšu are individual goddesses or aspects of the same goddess with names changes according to location or time period, are far more complex than can be given space here. Scholars have various views, a few of which have been mentioned here but the definite identities of these goddesses can take up a lot of time and space. Suffice to say that it is *possible* that they might have been the same goddess. Or at

¹²² This is based on evidence from a relief occurring in the Winchester College Collection (Hestrin 1987:218).

¹²³ The Lachish Ewer is to be found in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (Hestrin 1987:212).

¹²⁴ For details of why the sacred tree is believed to be Ašerah refer to Hestrin (1987:215-223).

least two or more may be the same. They are identified with each other and they have many similarities. Rather than refer to each one separately going forward in this study I am attempting to link them together for simplicity's sake as a Canaanite goddess under the name 'Elat. It will then be easier to compare 'Elat to Eve (cf 4.4.9) rather than each individual goddess. As Patai (1965:38) mentioned, 'Elat seems to be a generic term for goddess. The following table indicates the similarities of the four goddesses.

Table 8: Similarities between Ašerah, Astarte, Athirat and Qudšu.

	Ašerah	Astarte	Athirat	Qudšu
Mother goddess	X	X		
Consort of El	X	X		
Epithet: lady of the serpent	X	X		X
Epithet: lady of the sea	X	X		
Epithet: lady of the steppe	X			
Epithet: queen of heaven		X		X
Symbol: ašerah pole	X	X		
Symbol: stands upon lion	X	X		X
Appears with snakes	X	X		X
Appears with water lilies		X		X
Known as 'ašratu	X	X	X	
Known as 'lt ('Elat)	X		X	
Known as <i>qdš</i> (holy)	X		X	X

As can be seen on the Table there are a number of links between the four goddesses which warrants my grouping them together under one generic name 'Elat. The following notes would tend to support this. Astarte was known as 'Lady Ašerah of the Sea' which Patai (1965:38) tells us was the full name of Ašerah. 'lt referring to the feminine form would have to equate with Ašerah and Astarte as consorts of El. Athirat could also be referred to as 'lt so that would also make her a consort of El. Being a consort of El aligns these three goddesses. The inscribed word 'elat above the tree on the Lachish Ewer further links Ašerah and 'lt. The Amarna tablets of the 14th century BCE seems to suggest that Ašerah and Astarte were interchangeable (Patai 1965:38). An interesting issue is raised by Margalit (1990:269) where it is explained that names such as Athirat and Ašerah were originally common nouns referring to the consort of the male deity. Margalit writes that the literal meaning of the names is 'she

who walks in the footsteps of...'. The common noun became a proper noun through usage and resulted in the Ugaritic Athirat and its Hebrew equivalent Ašerah.

In addition to the links between their names through El, these goddesses had symbolism and epithets in common as indicated on the table above. They are all linked to serpents through their links with each other. I will now refer to these goddesses collectively as 'Elat.

4.4.7.1 *'Elat and the serpent symbol*

A very common image of the Syro-Palestinian goddess consisted of a naked female form generally facing forwards. Mostly she stands upon a lion. In her hands she holds one or more lilies, snakes or both.

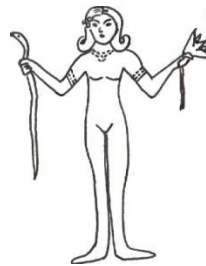


Figure 39: The naked goddess with snake and water lily¹²⁵

As Cornelius (2004:6) points out a particular representation such as this could be any one of several deities. I refer to her as 'Elat. Cornelius catalogues many examples of iconography of the Syro-Palestinian goddess dating from 1500 to 1000 BCE. The figure appears on faience and metal pendants, terracotta plaques and limestone stelae. In some representations 'Elat is flanked by Min on the side of the lilies and by Rešeph on the side of the snakes. Of great interest are the limestone relief stelae that Cornelius has catalogued as possibly being from Deir el-Medina.¹²⁶ This, as previously mentioned, is home of the local cult of the cobra goddess Meretseger where reliefs carved into the cliff faces showed workers worshipping the local goddess. One of the reliefs catalogued by Cornelius (Catalogue number 5.14, Plate 5.3 below) shows the goddess upon her lion holding multiple snakes and lilies being worshipped.

¹²⁵ Drawing by Wendy Golding (2012).

¹²⁶ See Catalogue numbers 5.3, 5.4, 5.7, 5.8, 5.14, 5.15, 5.16, 5.17, 5.26 (Cornelius 2004).



Figure 40: Worship of Qudšu, accompanied by Min and Rešeph

Although some of these images may be identified as *qdš* it is possible that they have come to represent local goddesses in various centres. I suggest an example may be the Egyptian Meretseger at Deir el-Medina. Meretseger is a snake goddess and the alignment of the ‘Elat figure with such a deity may reinforce her serpent alignment.

4.4.8 Establishing the healing aspect of ‘Elat

I believe that there are three elements that assist in identifying the healing aspect of ‘Elat’s character. These are the caduceus, the water lily and the god Rešeph. With regards to the caduceus I suggest that there is similarity and alignment with the iconography of Inanna and Ištar standing upon their lion and holding the serpent symbol. With the ‘Elat iconography the caduceus is replaced with a serpent and/or a lily. In both instances the goddesses hold vegetation and a serpent.

4.4.8.1 The water lily

The blue Nile water lily is *Nymphaea caerulea* and is endemic to the Nile Delta (Emboden 1978:399). It is this lily that is held by ‘Elat. In his article¹²⁷ Emboden (1978:395) writes that scholars of his time felt that Nymphaeaceae had no ‘real medicinal value’. Despite this perspective it is thought that the Nile lily may have narcotic properties. According to Emboden (1978:399) it would appear that certain water lilies can induce narcosis. The aim here is not prove whether or not the Nile lily actually does have healing properties or not, but an endeavour to indicate how it was perceived by the ancient Egyptians and people of Syria-Palestine.

¹²⁷ ‘The sacred narcotic lily of the Nile’ (Emboden 1978).

In this regard two ancient Egyptian vignettes are pointed out by Emboden as being important regarding the properties of the blue water lily. He believes that both of these scenes indicate ritual healing. The first of these is a scene on limestone dating to approximately 1350 BCE. In it Semenkhhara, who leans on a staff, is offered a water lily bud and mandrakes fruits by his consort Meriton. Leaning on his staff Semenkhhara appears weak and the offerings suggestive of something to give him strength (Emboden 1978:403-404).



Figure 41: The offering of mandrake fruits and a water lily bud to Semenkhhara¹²⁸

The other depiction noted by Emboden (1978:404) is that of the weak Tutankhamun being administered by his wife Ahkhesenamun. In her hand she holds a vessel in the shape and colour of the blue Nile water lily. Importantly Emboden (1978:405) notes that one of the epithets of Horus was as a healer and most scenes of veneration of this deity show a vessel covered by a water lily which is being offered to him. It may well be that the water lily held by 'Elat is a symbol of ritual healing.

An important healing spell comes to light from a statue located in Cairo. It is an invocation in which Isis and Nephthys are called upon to bring a lotus bloom to the reciter of the healing spell. This spell is specifically for healing snake bite (Borghouts 1978:112, cf also 5.2.2.3). This spell clearly links the water lily with healing.

In my opinion water lilies and snakes go hand in hand. They are both found in the Delta region of Egypt. The water lily as mentioned by Emboden (1978:399) appears to be endemic to this area which is the apparent origin of Egyptian goddesses such as Wadjet and Isis with serpent aspects. Indeed it is mentioned by McDonald (2002:122)

¹²⁸ Emboden (1978:403, Figure 4)

that the Nile water lily has a close symbolic association with Egyptian serpents such as Wadjet, Apophis and Seth. He also comments that water lily stalks are quite serpentine in appearance.



Figure 42: The goddess Wadjet with water lily and serpent sceptre¹²⁹

In the illustration above we see Wadjet with a water lily sceptre around which is entwined a serpent.

The water lily was considered to be holy. This is according to text from the *Papyrus of Ani* (Emboden 1978:400). It then makes perfect sense for 'Elat to be holding a water lily as *qdš* is one of her epithets. McDonald (2002:117) aligns the Middle Eastern tree of life with the Egyptian water lily *Nymphaea caerulea*. He mentions that it is often depicted with deities or animals such as snakes. The use of the water lily was not confined to ancient Egypt (McDonald 2002:126) but also appeared in Syria-Palestine. Therefore its use in Syro-Palestinian iconography such as with the naked goddess is not out of place.

The water lily was used to symbolise immortality and renewal of life (Cook 1930:57), rather like the serpent. In this case the goddess holds two symbols, one plant and one animal, which have the same symbolic meaning. To my mind this reinforces the functionality of the goddess and it appears to be linked to well-being and longevity which are dependent on good health.

¹²⁹ Budge (1969:438).

4.4.9 'Elat, Eve and the Genesis serpent

Now that the likelihood of 'Elat having a healing aspect has been established, I am able to proceed with aligning her with Eve in the biblical creation narrative in Genesis 3.

4.4.9.1 Etymological considerations

The Semitic name for Eve was Hawwa. This name has been linked etymologically to the words for serpent and life. Wallace (1985:148) tells us that the link between the names for Hawwa and serpent had been noted by early rabbinic interpreters. The link between Eve and the serpent and the possibility of her being a serpent goddess, or even a serpent was explored by scholars such as Nöldeke, Wellhausen and Gressman (Wallace 1985:148). More recently Wilson (2001:216) believes the serpent to be representative of Ašerah. The etymological serpent / life link is supported by Wilson (2001:210): 'the serpent is not the agent by which life is taken from man; he is the protector of life...'.

In the Garden of Eden narrative the serpent is portrayed quite differently to the above view and has become associated with sin and evil. According to commentary in Westermann (1984:237) there are various opinions on the function of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In one opinion it was viewed as 'Satan in disguise'. Another opinion has the serpent as a symbol of human or intellectual curiosity. It has also been viewed as a creature of magic, bringing prosperity, life and wisdom as well as a creature of chaos and the underworld. In addition the serpent was perceived of as an animal of cleverness.

Westermann (1984:237) mentions the opinion of Vriezen who rejected the negative viewpoints and felt that the serpent represented life and wisdom. He also believed that the Yahwist (the writer of the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis) turned it into a creature of temptation. Arnold (2009:62) informs us that the snake was part of the Canaanite fertility cult and that this cult was condemned by Israelite prophets. The views mentioned by Westermann (1984:237) are also reviewed by Arnold (2009:62-64). In addition he reminds us of the perception of the serpent in the ancient Near East

as a creature associated with wisdom, healing, protection and a knowledge of death (Arnold 2009:62).

I believe that this portrayal is intentional by the writer of the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis in order to disguise the true general perception of the serpent in Canaan. My reasons for this are as follows. In order for Yahweh to be the sole deity worthy of worship there can be no other deities alongside him, particularly not those that challenge his creator status. Eve, the mother of all living, is therefore reduced to the status of a mere mortal and the serpent is disgraced along with her. In effect the narrative serves to promote the status of Yahweh by diminishing the status of other beings. One should perhaps look beyond the biased beliefs and perceptions of the writer of the narrative and try to find the beliefs of the general population in order to understand how the serpent was really perceived and why it was depicted so negatively. Soggin (in Wallace 1985:163) believes that the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis is an ‘Israelite attack’ on the combining of Canaanite and Israelite belief systems.

The Semitic roots for Hawwa, serpent and life seem to have common origins.¹³⁰ Perhaps this is coincidental but to my mind the connections are not irrelevant. They can be seen in the Table below in Arabic and Hebrew words. In addition Wallace (1985:150) mentions that the early Aramaic for serpent was *hwh*. In Arabic script that would be حوة which can be compare to ‘Eve’ in the Table below.

Table 9: Illustration of Semitic roots of ‘serpent’ and ‘life’

Arabic		Hebrew	
حي	(hayya): verb meaning ‘he lived’ ¹³¹	חיה	(haya): verb meaning ‘to live’ ¹³²
حية	(hayya): noun meaning ‘snake, serpent, viper’ ¹³³		
حياة	(hayāh): noun meaning ‘life’ ¹³⁴		

¹³⁰ For an extensive commentary refer to Wallace (1985:150-152).

¹³¹ Cowan (1976:219).

¹³² Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:310).

¹³³ Cowan (1976:220).

¹³⁴ Cowan (1976:219).

حواة	(hawwa): Eve ¹³⁵	הוה	(ḥawa): seemingly a reference to Eve as a mother of all living ¹³⁶
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4.4.9.2 Linking Eve to 'Elat

It is mentioned by Wallace (1985:114) that Ašerah was a mother goddess and the consort of El. She was also the 'mother of all living' (Wallace 1985:149). Likewise Eve was believed to be the mother of all living (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2010:295). Wallace (1985:157) says that allocating the epithet *hwt* to Eve may be because she was associated with serpents, life and being a mother goddess. Going back to Wilson's (2001:216) comment that the serpent is representative of Ašerah we might start to equate Eve with 'Elat. Information given by Cook (1930:99) suggests that Mesopotamian influences where the mother goddess figure was linked to the serpent seem to have filtered into Syria-Palestine. His reason for this suggestion is a stele fragment from Tell Beit Mirsim depicting a walking figure with a serpent coiled around the legs.

Wilson (2001:97) mentions 'Elat appearing synonymously on an inscription with *hwt*. This inscription could well be the *Punic Tablet* discussed by Wallace (1985:152-153) which dates to the 3rd or 2nd century BCE. On the Tablet is a line reading *rbt hwt 'lt mlkt*. It is possible that '*lt* is an epithet for *hwt* or *vice versa*. In which case it is possible to insert Eve into the generic goddess group I refer to as 'Elat. Wallace (1985:152) mentions that *hwt* (Eve) was considered to be a chthonic serpent goddess. He also felt that epithets such as *hwt* and '*lt* were a reference to Ašerah and Tannit, a Phoenician serpent goddess.

Eve could easily be equated with Ašerah. The tree of life in the Garden of Eden could be considered as her symbolic '*ašerah*. She is also clearly linked to the serpent. Wallace (1985:157) says that allocating the epithet *hwt* to the goddess may be because she was associated with serpents and life as a mother goddess.

¹³⁵ Cowan (1976:211).

¹³⁶ Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:295).

4.4.9.3 Eve's serpent

Importantly in Syria-Palestine the serpent is connected to healing and to healing power primarily through Moses and Nehušan (Wallace 1985:159).¹³⁷ This concept was also prevalent in the Punic and Classical worlds where the snake was the symbol of the healing deity Asclepius (Wallace 1985:159). It is suggested by Wilson (2001:72) that it is important to take into account the serpent and tree link in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden when considering the caduceus. Although it is not clear from the Genesis 3 narrative, I believe that Eve's serpent is a symbol of the goddess herself and is related to her healing aspect. It is possible that the Garden of Eden narrative forms a veneer which hides the true perceptions regarding the goddess and the serpent.

4.4.9.4 Hvidberg's view on the identity of the Genesis serpent

Hvidberg (1960:287) has an interesting perspective on the identity of the serpent in the Garden of Eden narrative. He believes that it is Baal. According to Hvidberg (1960:287) Baal, who usually appeared in the form of a man or bull could also appear in serpent form. He further explains that the serpent assists the goddess in performing her functions by being a giver of life, renewal, restoration and fertilisation. It is Hvidberg's belief (1960:287) that the life-giving and renewal function of the serpent must be viewed hand in hand with its function as a healer and a 'physician god'. Hvidberg (1960:287) feels that Baal's function as a fertility god and healer cannot be separated. They are both life-giving functions.

In my opinion the above information enables two important conclusions to be drawn about Eve. Firstly, if the serpent (Baal in this instance) is the assistant of the goddess, then in the Garden of Eden Eve must be the goddess. Secondly, if the serpent aids the goddess (Eve) in performing her functions, and if one of the functions that he enables is life-giving/renewing/restoring, in other words – health, then one of her functions must be healing.

¹³⁷ The serpent is also linked to wisdom, fertility and immortality (Wallace 1985:161).

Hvidberg aligns Baal with Nehuštān (1960:288). Although he does not give his reason for this alignment, he believes that the bronze serpent supports the idea that Baal in serpent form was a healer and giver of life.

4.4.9.5 Snake motif artefacts

Koh (1994:6) suggests condemnation of the Canaanite serpent cult by the Israelites. This may well be due to the rise of Israelite monotheism over polytheism. The serpent is therefore cast in the role of the antagonist in Genesis (Koh 1994:7). In this regard Hvidberg (1960:288) says that the serpent was based on a figure that ‘played a prominent part in the mental world’ of the people of the time.

Koh’s study (1994:88) concludes that the increase in artefacts with snake motifs from the Middle Bronze Age into the Late Bronze Age is suggestive of the fact that the snake cult was on the rise (Koh 1994:89) and that female characteristics associated with these images were indicative of the fact that the cult was linked to a goddess. The rise of this cult, which Koh (1994:89) believes was becoming a recognised institution, seems to aid the understanding of the demise of Eve and her serpent in Genesis.

Koh (1994:91) believes that the snake deity was female for several reasons. Firstly, both a snake figurine from Hazor and the representation of a snake on a jug from Beth Shan have nipples. Secondly, the Nami pendant is comprised of two intertwined snakes forming a female torso. Thirdly, examples of clay plaques show female figures with snakes. Fourthly, there are pottery snake figurines from Beth Shan which are clearly female.

The number of snake-motif artefacts and range of sites where they were found decreased during the Iron Age in Syria-Palestine (Koh 1994:104).

4.4.10 Iṣhara

Iṣhara was believed by the Mesopotamians to be a form of Iṣtar (Wilson 2001:93). Her role in Mesopotamia has already been discussed in Chapter Three (cf 3.4.1.8). Wilson (2001:93) tells us that Van der Toorn (1999) identified Iṣhara with Astarte,

and that she was linked to the snake at Ugarit. Koh (1994:4) discusses a goddess from Ugarit named Ušhara whom he believes could possibly be a snake goddess. A part of a text known as *RS 24.260*, mentions sacrifices made by the king to this goddess. This indicates an active worship of her. According to Koh (1994:5) this Ugaritic Ušhara may well be the Mesopotamian Išhara and she was worshipped at places such as Emar, Alalakh, Mari and Ebla (Koh 1994:6). According to Astour in Koh (1994:136) Ušhara was a healing goddess.

4.4.11 Rešeph

Rešeph was a West Semitic god of plague and disease. He was aligned with the Babylonian god Nergal (Leick 1998:143). Cornelius (1994:260) refers to the view of Stadelmann (1967:73-74, 139) that Rešeph was a god of healing. According to Te Velde (1995:1739) he was introduced into Egypt during the New Kingdom period.

Rešeph was not a serpent nor was he a serpent god but it is possible that he had some kind of serpent connection. He appears on several limestone stelae found at Deir el-Medina that appear to date to approximately the 19th Dynasty (13th century BCE). On these stelae he appears to one side of the goddess Qudšu as she holds serpents out towards him. Cornelius (1994:260) feels that the meaning of the goddess's action is unclear as Rešeph had no serpent connections. His reason for believing that the water lilies and the serpents that Qudšu holds are related purely to her and not to the deities flanking her, are because she also appears on her own holding these items. In other words they reflect aspects of Qudšu. However, I think that when she is holding the water lilies towards Min and the snakes towards Rešeph it is because these items emphasize aspects of these deities. So the serpents held towards Rešeph would emphasize his healing aspect, particularly as he is standing in a relaxed and non-menacing manner.

Cornelius (1994:260) believes that in the triad with Min and Qudšu, Rešeph does not represent a god of war or fertility but rather a deity of life and well-being.

4.4.12 Comparison between the Syro-Palestinian serpents of healing and well-being

Table 10: The Syro-Palestinian serpents of healing

Key to abbreviations

SP: Syria-Palestine

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	Gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Serpent aspect	Serpent association	Demonised	Uses serpent symbol	Chthonic	Vegetative or agricultural
Nehuštan	SP	M?		X						
Ašerah	SP	F				X		X	X?	
Astarte	SP	F				X		X		X
Athirat	SP	F								
Qudšu	SP	F				X		X		X
‘Elat	SP	F				X				
Hawwa (Eve)	SP	F				X			X?	X
Išhara	SP	F				X		X		
Rešeph	SP	M				X		X		

Johnson (1981:38) raises a valuable point. She believes that the serpents grasped by the naked Syrian goddess figures (‘Elat) represent the earth’s vegetation which continually decays and revives. This concept can be transferred to the sloughing of a snake’s skin. It is revival and renewal. Consider the following: when one is ill and recovers it is as if one has been renewed or revived. I believe that the naked Syrian goddess represents this process on the level of agriculture, health and well-being, hence her association with snakes and water lilies. Both of these are representatives of revival, renewal and immortality.

- Of the deities shown in the above Table the only one that can be mentioned with a measure of conviction as being a serpent healing deity is Nehuštan. The gender of this deity is not entirely clear.
- We know Rešeph to be a healing deity, in addition to his other roles as a god of war and disease. He is associated with the serpent through the

iconography with Qudšu and Min. The appearance of the serpent in this iconography is likely to relate to his healing aspect whilst at the same time emphasizing the healing aspect of the goddess holding them. Likewise the presence of Rešeph in the iconography is suggestive of the healing aspect of the goddess.

- Due to the nature of evidence from Syria-Palestine it is difficult to prove without doubt the serpent and healing aspects of the 'Elat group of goddesses. She is continually referred to as a fertility goddess by various scholars but I find the evidence of this to be just as circumstantial as my assertions that she had a healing aspect. In my opinion I feel that it is justified in suggesting that the 'Elat group had a healing function due to their serpent connections. The possibility of this function is strengthened by the presence of various symbols such as the caduceus and water lilies.
- Only Nehušan can truly be considered as a serpent deity. The other entities on the Table above can only be considered to have associations with the serpent at this point.
- Only two of the deities on the Table may possibly have chthonic associations. These possibilities are Ašerah and Hawwa (Eve). I have not found any concrete evidence of this thus far.
- Three goddesses of the 'Elat group have a vegetation association. Eve is linked to the trees of good and evil and of knowledge. Ašerah is linked to a tree of life on the Lachish Ewer. Qudšu is portrayed with water lilies.
- A serpent aspect cannot be allocated to any of the deities on the table with conviction. It is suggested by epithets that some of the deities may have had a serpent aspect. Unfortunately the reason for epithets such as *pt(n)yh* and 'serpent lady' seem to have become lost with time.

4.5 CONCLUSION

Once the three Tables of healing deities in this Chapter are compared with each other certain information regarding serpents and healing emerges.

Firstly, regarding the *gender* of serpent deities, serpents and hybrids connected to healing, it emerges that in Mesopotamia these entities are male. In ancient Egypt there is one of the female gender and in Syria-Palestine there is one possibly of the male gender.

Secondly, deities that are *associated* with serpents in Mesopotamia are predominantly female (62.50%). In Egypt they are female. In Syria-Palestine they are overwhelmingly female (85.70%), Rešeph being the exception.

Thirdly, from points one and two we can conclude that amongst the deities linked to healing, if the serpent is deified it is likely to be male. If the serpent is associated with a deity it will more likely be linked to a goddess than a god. Healing or nurturing goddesses seem to have serpent symbols whilst healing gods embody the serpent.

Fourthly, many of the Mesopotamian deities linked to healing have a *dual nature*. In other words they have a healing as well as a chaotic or mischievous function. Of the Egyptian deities only Isis seems to fill this dual role as indicated in the myth where she creates a venomous serpent to bite Re. Of the Syro-Palestinian deities only Rešeph fills the dual roles.

Fifthly, over half the deities on the Mesopotamian Table are *chthonic* and this appears to be linked to their role in *agricultural mythology*. None of the Egyptian deities are chthonic nor do they seem to be linked to agriculture during the Bronze Age. The possibility exists that Ašerah and Hawwa may be chthonic but the reasons for this supposition are not substantiated. None of the Syro-Palestinian deities on the table are linked to agricultural cycles despite their vegetative links.

Sixthly, from point five above we can conclude that serpent deities and deities with serpent associations linked to healing have a chthonic character in Mesopotamia but not in ancient Egypt or Syria-Palestine. This chthonic character is linked to agriculture. This suggests that the Mesopotamians viewed the serpent as a creature that disappeared underground and linked it to the agricultural cycle. Why was this perception of the serpent not apparent in ancient Egypt or Syria-Palestine? It is

possible that the cyclical nature of the seasons was far more apparent in arts of Mesopotamia than in Egypt or Syria-Palestine. The ancient Egyptians and Syro-Palestinians would certainly have noticed that snakes disappear into holes in the ground but they did not link the chthonic and agricultural aspects in the same way that the Mesopotamians did.

Seventhly, there are definite *healing serpent families* in Mesopotamia which do not appear in Egypt or in Syria-Palestine.

Finally, the Egyptian deities on the Table are linked to *magic* quite strongly. It seems likely that the serpent was linked to magic in Syria-Palestine as suggested by the verb נחש meaning to practice divination (cf 4.4.1). נחש was also used to refer to the rod of Aaron that transformed into a serpent. In Mesopotamia Ea and Marduk were gods of magic. There seems to be a link between healing, serpents and magic in all three regions.

CHAPTER FIVE

UTILISATION OF THE SERPENT IN HEALING

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter it is investigated how the serpent was used in healing and well-being and its role in apotropaic magic in this regard. Therefore the amulets of healing associated with the serpent will be discussed. The functioning of magic and its relationship with religion has already been discussed in Chapter Two, as has the definition of apotropaic magic, and the purpose, function and types of amulets.

The healing of injuries and illnesses has an important place in religion, and important religious figures or symbols were often perceived to be the source of healing powers, say Sullivan & Sered (2005:3808). Healing not only involves the attempt to recover the individual from illness or injury. According to Sullivan & Sered (2005:3808) it also involved getting rid of evil and disorder (chaos) and re-establishing or maintaining order. Healing therefore treats, or can be applied to, the macro (universal) and micro (individual) elements.

The serpent, serpent deities, and deities with serpent aspects and associations that played a role in causing chaos (macro level) and illness (micro level) could be dealt with through means of healing devices. These devices include medical and ritual actions, invocations and incantations and other amulets. The ancient Near Easterners used these devices to deal with negative entities and the problems they caused, or were believed to cause. Treatments could be magical or rational (David 2004:141).

Amulets for healing generally took on the form of the spoken word. This incorporated invocations, incantations and spells used in exorcisms. Naturally the spoken word found its way into written form, appearing on amulets such as stelae and statues, and in texts. In addition to this there were medicinal recipes for healing utilising herbal ingredients and also animal and mineral components.

The role of the serpent in healing involved two distinct directions. Firstly, there were healing methods intended to ease the suffering or cure the sufferer from venomous snake bites. Secondly, there was the incorporation of the serpent into the healing regime. This could involve the invocation of serpent deities (or those with serpent aspects or associations) to assist with healing. This assistance could be required for the healing of venomous snake bites or for the healing of ailments not related to snake bites at all. The serpent could be incorporated into the healing regime by the use of snake parts in medicinal or healing compounds and potions. The division into these two categories demonstrates the opposite roles of the serpent and the manner in which it was perceived.

In Mesopotamia it was believed that the *ašipu* or exorcist was bestowed with knowledge from the god Enki (Ea) through the goddess Ninisina (Mander 2005:3824). The *azu* (pharmacist and minor surgeon) obtained his knowledge from the deities Ninisin and Damu, and not Enki (Ea). The *ašipu*, being the exorcist used incantations and rituals to ward off negative entities and perform healing, whilst the *azu* used medicine, probably herbal. In ancient Mesopotamia texts for exorcists exist from the 3rd millennium BCE onwards (Mander 2005:3825).

Similarly papyri from ancient Egypt contain diagnostic and therapeutic information. Of primary importance with regards to this dissertation is the *Brooklyn Papyrus* which was a manual for the priests of Selqet. It identifies species of snakes, the effects of their bites and treatment thereof.

The association of snakes with other fertility iconography in Syria-Palestine, such as bulls, water, nipples, plant life and grain, leads Koh (1994:136) to conclude that the serpent in Syria-Palestinian iconography was linked to life and fertility, and therefore healing as a maintainer of life and health.

Healing amulets are different from amulets of protection which will be dealt with in Chapter Seven. Protective amulets discuss the ways in which the individual used magic to attempt to protect him- or herself from actual snake bites occurring.

5.2 HEALING VENOMOUS SNAKE BITES

5.2.1 Incantations

When discussing the various types of verbal utterances used by magical and medical personal it is useful to have an understanding of what these words mean.

5.2.1.1 *Definition*

An incantation is a magical formula, spell or charm. The word derives from the Latin *canto*, meaning ‘to chant’ (Fowler *et al* 1976:407). An incantation would therefore be chanted by a magician, priest or healer. The incantation is explained by Spronk (1999:270) as being a rhythmic formula of words. By appealing to spiritual powers in this manner a desired outcome is anticipated.

Magic spells for everyday use were individualistic according to Borghouts (1978:vii), who also informs us that transmission of such spells reaches us from the Egyptian Middle and New Kingdom periods. The sources of Egyptian magic spells are primarily stelae, papyri, ostraca, healing statues and magic reference books. Spells written on papyrus could be rolled up and placed in amulet cases or worn around the person’s neck. Magic spells were generally accompanied by specific ritual actions and, in the case of healing, specific medical recommendations (Borghouts 1978:viii).

Borghouts (1978:ix) explains that the magic spell could take on one of two basic formats. Firstly, a spell could be mythologised. In other words, mythology was used as an analogy. Secondly, a spell could take on a non-mythological format where the enemy (cause of the suffering) was confronted directly by the sufferer or by the magician.

5.2.1.2 *Ugaritic texts*

In the case of texts from Ugarit, Spronk (1999:271) comments that it is often tricky to distinguish prayers and incantations from one another. Texts from Ugarit in this genre could appeal to the supernatural powers in a range from prayers to the use of magic to ‘bind’ the negative entities (Spronk 1999:272). In the first instance (prayer or invocation) the gods were appealed to as intermediaries in order to provide healing or

protection. In the second instance a more direct approach was involved by using magic to solve the problem. An incantation in an Ugaritic text labelled RS 92.2014 describes an unknown evil force as a ‘foaming snake’ and a scorpion. The incantation involves the use of sacred wood to exorcise the evil force (Spronk 1999:281).

An Ugaritic incantation to heal snake bites is text KTU 1.100 (or RS 24.244) in which the god Horon is called upon to heal a snake bite. In the twelfth repetition of the incantation the snake venom is believed to become weak and flows away (Spronk 1999:280). Watson & Wyatt (1999:575) mention that KTU 1.107 is an incantation for curing a practitioner from snake bite.

RS 24.251 is a tablet from Ugarit that may relate to the healing of a snake charmer that has been bitten by a snake. The first part of the text relays how the god Horon plays the role of a snake charmer. A novice snake charmer is unsuccessful in making a venomous snake harmless and gets bitten. Horon intervenes and saves the snake charmer (Astour 1968:29-30).

5.2.1.3 Mesopotamian incantations

A number of Old Babylonian incantations discussed by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:2-3) appear to have come from the kingdom of Larsa and almost half of the published incantations mentioned by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:3) concerned snake and scorpion incantations. These incantations discussed by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:7) would appear to be intended to heal snake bite, or at least attempt to provide relief to the sufferer. The incantations are difficult to interpret accurately according to Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:7) but it appears *muš-bur-ru-da* is a reference in an incantation to alleviate suffering of one bitten by a snake.

Van Dijk & Geller (2003) discuss a series of incantations from the Ur III period. It is Geller’s opinion (in Van Dijk & Geller 2003:3) that snake incantations of this collection may have been intended to aid the individual on a psychological level more than anything else. In other words it was the fear that was treated. Part of an anti-venom incantation reads:

The snake must not show its fangs,
The scorpion must not show its tooth,
But may that snake return to its left/back side,

And may that scorpion return to its cleft (Van Dijk & Geller 2003:16).

As an earlier part of this incantation refers to King Shulgi it is possible this incantation was for the royal court.

Another example of an incantation from the Ur III period intended to cure a sufferer from snake bite is given by Veldhuis (1993:161-163). The incantation (VS 10, 193) is entitled *An incantation against snake bite, scorpion sting, and dog bite*. It would appear that the incantation could be used to hopefully heal snake bites, scorpion stings or even dog bites. In the incantation the god Asarluhi¹³⁸ approaches Enki saying that he does not know what to do to heal the sufferer. Enki responds by saying water must be purified in a holy tube and drunk by the sufferer. This should cause any poison to leave the body. According to Veldhuis (1993:165) the incantation was to be recited over the water that was to be drunk by the sufferer.

A childbirth incantation (HS 1473 and 1598) seems to contain an anti-snakebite incantation. A herbal remedy is applied to the sick place (Van Dijk & Geller 2003:21) in order to ‘bind the tooth of the fearful snake, on dry land, so that the incantation may bind the tooth of the gall-gnashing snake’ (Van Dijk & Geller 2003:22). It is suggested by Van Dijk & Geller (2003:22) that as this is incorporated into a childbirth incantation there may be some kind of connection between problems during childbirth and snakebites. I would suggest that the snake bite may even cause premature labour.

An incantation from Van Dijk & Geller (2003:26) to cure a sick eye reads as follows:

In order to infest the man’s house, [the snake] passed by the window and attacked
[him], in the house [where] it is dragged away,
Your sight improved.
[The incantation is intended] to improve a sick eye.
[Colophon:] snakebite.

As Van Dijk & Geller (2003:26) comment, snakebite was thought to cause eye-disease. I would suggest that this may be due to vision disturbances brought on by an envenomed bite rather than any other factor.

¹³⁸ Asarluhi was a Mesopotamian deity associated with the god Enki and also with magic. His name is used interchangeably with Marduk’s name in prayers and incantations (Black & Green 2008:36).

Van Dijk & Geller (2003:28) comment on a group of incantations which they refer to as the Samana incantations. They suggest that *muš* (which normally refers to a snake) in these incantations should possibly not be taken literally and that the word may refer to a demon that causes illness.

5.2.1.4 A Sumerian incantation to seize a snake

A Sumerian incantation for ‘seizing a snake’ is given in Gurney & Kramer (1976:34). It reads:

The hand-lifting snake, the snake that approached a man,
Like a sea snake lifted its ‘hand’ upon [the man’s] breast,
Like a ... snake lifted its ‘hand’ upon [his] breast,
The raging snake lifted [its] hand upon him,
Like a big raging snake it lifted [its] hand upon him.
The fire-blowing snake, the horned snake,
The seven-headed snake;
...has not, who lifts a holy hand.
The incantation of Nin-girim,
The spell of Eridu,
Asarluhi...son of Enki...

Gurney & Kramer (1976:35) suggest that the reference to the snake’s hand is a metaphorical expression. Many illnesses and afflictions were caused by the ‘hand’ of a deity or demon. For this reason I suggest that this is a healing incantation. An individual has fallen ill due to the ‘hand’ of a snake. The snake is described in chaotic terms as ‘raging snake’, ‘fire-blowing snake’ and ‘seven-headed snake’. There is also a reference to ‘sea snake’. In Chapter Three (3.3.1.1) the chaotic serpent aspect of Tiamat was discussed. Mušmahhu (cf Chapter Three, 3.3.1.2) was a seven-headed serpent hybrid monster and one of her evil cohorts. This incantation in its very description of the snake, to my mind, seems to acknowledge chaos on a macro level by its reference to the serpents of chaos. What affects the macro level also affects the individual on a micro level in the form of illness. The incantation therefore acknowledges the interconnectedness between the mythological and the human levels.

5.2.1.5 Egyptian incantations

Borghouts (1978:76) reveals a magic spell designed to counter the effects of snake and scorpion venom. The part of the spell concerning the serpent reads: ‘turn yourself, venomous snake, draw out your poison which is in the limbs of NN born of NN! See the magic of Horus has gained victory over you. Break out, Poison, come to the

earth!’ (Borghouts 1978:76). The spell is accompanied by ritual action which involves reciting the spell over the painted wooden image of a falcon with feather plumes upon its head. Specifically the spell requires the wood to be tamarisk. Offerings to the falcon include bread and the burning of incense. This image and accompanying offering was, says Borghouts (1978:76) placed before the snake bite sufferer in order to ward off the effects of venom.

Sauneron (1989:186) says that magic formulas do not seem to play an important role in the *Brooklyn Papyrus*. Apparently out of sixty-two ‘recipes’ only six were accompanied by recitations, and three of these went hand in hand with fumigations. It is therefore difficult to ascertain if recited formulas were used in snake bite treatment. It is possible that many were never written down. The recitations that accompanied fumigations would most likely have played a role on the psychological level of the patient rather than the physical level.

5.2.1.6 Spells and incantations contained in New Kingdom Egyptian papyri

Papyri housed in the British Museum labelled BM EA 9997 and 10309 contain incantations against snakes, as do the papyri BM EA 10085 and 10105. Both BM EA 9997 and BM EA 10309 were originally part of the same manuscript but had been housed in two separate museums (Leitz 1999:3). BM EA 9997 appears to contain seven incantations whilst BW EA 10309 has four. Some of these incantations are discussed under point 5.2.3 below as they contain a mythological element.

In incantation 1 of BM EA 9997 the words are recited over an image of the god Ptah. Although Leitz (1999:3) says this may have been used as a protective incantation against snake bite or scorpion stings, I feel that it may have been used in healing. This is because the last two lines read: ‘[...] by the patient. The poison is indeed rendered harmless’ (Leitz 1999:4). The use of the word ‘patient’ suggests that the individual was bitten and the last line suggests that the use of the incantation was to hopefully neutralise the poison, or at least calm the sufferer.

BM EA 9997’s incantation 2 pertains largely to crocodiles but the anonymous goddess who is called upon to assist the individual is bitten by a snake (Leitz 1999:4). Symptoms concurrent with an envenomed cobra bite are described but the goddess

recovers. The description shows the awareness of the ancient Egyptian with regards to bite symptoms. The treatment appears to be a pot of sweet beer upon which images of four crocodiles are drawn in ochre (Leitz 1999:8). This latter part of the incantation concerning the recovery of the goddess may render it a healing incantation.

Leitz (1999:12) discusses incantation 5 which is similar to incantation 3 (discussed in 5.2.3) with Isis invoking other deities for assistance. Selqet is one of these deities. Importantly he mentions that the patient is identified with Horus: '[r]emove your poison, which has glided into the body of Horus, which has glided into the body of this man who suffers of this bite...' (Leitz 1999:16). Incantations 3 and 5 of BM EA 9997 therefore exemplify the use of mythology in incantations for healing. The patient has to wear an amulet necklace of small glazed images to facilitate healing. The incantation is to be recited over wooden images of the deities Isis, Atum, Selqet and Sia.

Similar to incantations 3 and 5 of BM EA 9997 is incantation 6. Nephthys accompanies her sister, Isis. Like the other incantations they appeal to the gods to assist as Horus was bitten after treading on a snake. Like the other two incantations the snake itself is addressed and the poison commanded to leave the body (Leitz 1999:18). The reliance on Neith and Selqet as goddesses of magic is seen in this incantation: 'Neith has felled you, she who created Re(?) [You] have been punished [...] her potent magic [...] the furious ones by Selkis by the efficacy of her incantation!' Clearly there is some kind of medicinal remedy that forms part of this treatment. One of the lines read: 'To be [drunk] by the patient' (Leitz 1999: 21). It seems that various images are required although there are lacunae in the text but possibly include Selqet, Isis, Nephthys and Hathor. The first three we know to have serpent forms or aspects. In addition the medicinal part of the healing process requires myrrh¹³⁹ to be placed at the neck of the patient.

¹³⁹ Myrrh, according to Tisserand (1991:257) grows in North East Africa and Arabia and also the region that made up ancient Mesopotamia. Ancient Egyptians used it for medicinal and rejuvenation purposes. It was also used by the Greeks for healing and as an anti-inflammatory (Tisserand 1991:158). Its use to strengthen the pulmonary system and to help heal wounds is also mentioned by Tisserand (1991:259). One can therefore understand why it was prescribed in incantations.

BM EA 10309 is not completely preserved and therefore not all the information contained in the incantations can be obtained.

Incantation 2 contains information which reflects beliefs in what ritual activities were believed to help alleviate the suffering of one bitten by a snake and hopefully provide a cure. Leitz (1999: 22) explains that water used in the ritual was believed to alleviate the 'burning effect of the poison'. The gods Ptah and Re are invoked and the patient is aligned with Horus. Gold images of these deities, as well as Selqet and the Lady of Chemmis are strung around the sufferer's neck and the incantation is recited over these (Leitz 1999:26). Each part of the body of Horus (the sufferer) is aligned with a deity. No doubt this was intended to give strength to the sufferer.

Incantation 3 is specifically intended to heal the sufferer of an envenomed cobra bite. Once again the sufferer is aligned with Horus, whilst Isis, Selqet and Maat invoke the poison to dissipate (Leitz 1999:28). The incantation is recited over images placed at the sufferer's neck.

BM EA 10085 contains two sections pertaining to snake bites. The text is not preserved in its entirety so some information is lost. Horus is aligned with the sufferer. Isis uses her magical powers to rid the sufferer of the effects of the venom.

5.2.1.7 Anti-venom spell from the Chester-Beatty Papyrus

In the *Chester-Beatty Papyrus* VII is an anti-venom spell wherein the magician has to symbolically enclose the poison in his right hand, and then his left. The spell is recited over plants tied into seven knots. This was then soaked (in what, we do not know) and then applied to the bite wound (Pinch 2006:84).

5.2.1.8 Prayer in Biblical times

In Biblical times it was believed that prayer or a good deed may help save an individual who was about to die from snakebite (Rosner 1977:191). One wonders if this may be suggestive of possible earlier Canaanite actions in the event of a seemingly fatal bite – prayers, incantations and ritual action. Prayers and incantations occurred in the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian contexts so it is possible it existed in the Syro-Palestinian context also.

5.2.2 Invocations

5.2.2.1 Definition

An invocation is an appeal to a deity, often in the form of a prayer, or it is a summons by use of magical means (Fowler *et al* 1976:424).

5.2.2.2 Ugaritic texts

Spronk (1999:278-279) mentions an Ugaritic text known as KTU 1.82 (or RS 15.134) in which deities are invoked to destroy various evil forces. Included in these evil forces is Rešeph, god of disease as well as of serpents. As the invocation requests the driving out of these forces we can safely assume it is an invocation to bring about healing although the exact nature of the infliction is unknown.

5.2.2.3 Egyptian spells

Borghouts (1978:93) gives information on a spell for healing snake bite from a statue located in Cairo. Isis and Nephthys are invoked as mothers of Horus (Borghouts 1978:112) to bring a lotus flower to the one reciting the spell. The lotus bloom is specifically seven cubits with a bud of eight cubits¹⁴⁰ and is required to cool the effects of the venom in the sufferer.

From the *Ddhr* statue comes a healing spell in which Re, Geb, Nut, Osiris and Horus are invoked to aid the sufferer who has been bitten and restore him to life. The gods are invoked to repel the poison (Borghouts 1978:96-97).

5.2.3 The use of mythology

The retelling of a myth is one of the tools used in healing (Sullivan & Sered 2005:3813). The sufferer is aligned with a deity in the myth so the individual (micro level) gets transferred to the cosmic (macro) level. This technique was used in attempting to cure an individual of snake bite or scorpion stings. Borghouts (1978:viii) explains that one of the formats that a magic spell could take was the mythologizing of the spell. In other words mythology was used as an analogy. As

¹⁴⁰ This does seem rather large for a lotus considering that a cubit is generally accepted as being the length of a fore-arm.

Sauneron (1989:188) says, many solutions were believed to be found in the divine realm, and both medicinal and magical remedies were integrated and complemented each other.

5.2.3.1 The myth of Isis and Re

Aspects of the well-known Egyptian myth of Isis curing the sun god Re (cf 4.3.1.1) finds its way into many incantations for snake bite cures. The myth comes from an anti-venom spell in the *Turin Magical Papyrus* which dates to the 12th century BCE (Pinch 2006:30). Isis created a snake from clay and the saliva of the sun god Re. She hid the snake on the path where Re walked and it bit him. Isis said that she alone could cure Re but that in order to do this she needed to know his secret name. Initially Re would not surrender his secret name but, realising that he was gravely ill and going to die, he eventually divulged his secret name (Pinch 2006:30-31). Isis used her magic powers and removed the venom from Re's body.

5.2.3.2 Egyptian incantations incorporating mythology

Incantation 3 from the New Kingdom medical papyrus BM EA 9997 is rather mythological in nature. The god Horus has been bitten by a snake and his mother, the goddess Isis appeals to the deities Geb, Atum and Nut for help. Leitz (1999:9) explains that Horus also appeals directly to Atum for aid. This mythological incantation was recited over a figurine of Isis, no doubt appealing to her role as a healing and nurturing deity. Selqet, the scorpion and snake goddess is also invoked in this incantation (Leitz 1999:10). Incantations 5 and 6 of the same manuscript also incorporate the Horus – Isis mythology but the other aspects of these incantations are discussed in 5.2.1.6 above.

The *Ddhr* statue (Borghouts 1978:125) tells of how the god Atum deals with a snake. This is an example of how spells are designated to the realm of the gods. The spell was apparently written on the arm of a statue (Borghouts 1978:112). The sun god turned into a mongoose in order to slaughter Apophis (Borghouts 1978:95). The goddess Ius'a'as is credited with ridding the sufferer of ailments, impurities, snake and scorpion venom.

5.2.3.3 *The use of myth in the Brooklyn Papyrus*

Sauneron mentions that a few of the passages in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* incorporate the use of mythology. One of the passages draws on the legend relating to the teeth of Horus, and linked to it is a hymn to the onion which was believed to be an enemy of venom (Sauneron (1989:187). Another text, says Sauneron (1989:187) evokes the story of the revolt of humankind against the sun god Re and the enemies of Osiris. The god Thoth heals Re who had been bitten by a snake. By analogy the sufferer is aligned with Re by associating the situations. This same principle of association is used in a passage regarding the infant Horus who was bitten by a snake and his subsequent healing through the magic of Isis. This text could be worn as an amulet around the neck (Sauneron 1989:187). Another portion of the text incorporates the serpent of Buto. In the text Horus is bitten in the marshes of Buto, located in Egypt's delta region. The magical principle here is that Horus was bitten by mistake. The venom is commanded to leave the patient as he was bitten in error (Sauneron 1989:188). Lastly, mythology is hinted at in a section of the text pertaining to use of the *itjérou*-plant. In the text is an inference to the cat of Heliopolis (Sauneron 1989:188). The plant was believed to have grown in the side of Osiris (Sauneron 1989:121) and have secretions that would kill the 'abominable venom'. The 'abominable venom' was cut up by the cat of Heliopolis (Sauneron 1989:121). This makes one immediately think of Apophis being cut up by Mafdet and also by the cat of Heliopolis. Perhaps the intention was to align the venom with the serpent-demon Apophis. Death of Apophis could probably be equated with death of the venom. The *itjérou*-plant has been identified as *Capparis decidua*. It grows in Egypt amongst other places. Fruits of the *Capparis* species have a high nutritive content. One of its uses is mentioned as an antidote to snake bite by Mishra, Tomar & Lakra (2007:230).¹⁴¹ The fruit and seeds can be used for snake bite (Mishra, Tomar & Lakra 2007:234).

5.2.4 Exorcism

5.2.4.1 *Using modern day Iraqi traditions as an analogy*

¹⁴¹ Refer to the article by Mushra, Tomar & Lakra (2007:230-238) for information on modern day scientific studies on the *Capparis* species and its food and medicinal values.

In reading Corkill (1939:50) one learns of a modern day Iraqi ritual intended to heal a person bitten by a venomous snake. It may be that such traditions have extended from ancient times into modern day life, and I suggest that it is possible that the modern day traditions can be used as an analogy in order to gain insight into ancient healing practices. Indeed Astour (1968:36) believes that the practices of modern day snake charmers do in fact extend back to the Bronze Age.

In this regard Thompson (1904:xxxix) says that the modern day Semitic descendants of the ancient Mesopotamians still used the same amulets and manner of using them that had been used for the past few thousand years. There is no reason therefore why the Iraqi Sayyids could not have practised similarly with regards to their exorcisms and snake handling.

Corkill (1939:50) tells of a man bitten in 1929 by a venomous snake. The man fell unconscious and was taken to a Sayyid (respected community member). The Sayyid, being a holy man, proceeded to pray over the victim, who recovered consciousness (Corkill 1939:50). The venom is considered to be a jinn or spirit that has entered the body and the holy person attempts to exorcize it through prayer. This seems to correspond with what we have already learned about ancient Mesopotamian practices. In Chapter Two (cf 2.4.2.1 and 2.4.2.3) Mesopotamian snake handlers and exorcists were discussed as well as the perception of the illness as an evil force that entered the body (cf 2.2.1.3). It is now clear to see that the ancient and modern concepts in that part of the world are very similar.

In modern day Iraq are snake charmers who specialise in handling venomous snakes. They have an understanding of them and Corkill (1939:45) explains that they master safe handling by making themselves familiar with the snakes and employing correct handling techniques, and also by removing the snake's fangs or venom. This corresponds with information from the Bronze Age Ugaritic serpent charms.

5.2.4.2 Egyptian exorcisms in the Brooklyn Papyrus

Sauneron (1989:187) mentions that many of the remedies in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* seem to deal with the external symptoms without necessarily considering the cause, which is the presence of venom in the body. It was believed that venom was a hostile

conscious principle (or entity) and sensitive to the actions of magic (Sauneron 1989:187). Presumably this explains why most external symptoms were treated scientifically (swellings, infections and so forth) and the internal cause was treated from a magical perspective. A section of text in the papayrus that suggests this belief is ‘if one recites an exorcism on him, he will live’ (Sauneron 1989:187). One could also exorcise the venom with formulas of appeasement. It was believed that vomiting would aid the exorcism of the venom (Sauneron 1989:187). To my mind the belief that venom could be exorcised suggests that it was perceived to be a living entity rather than a substance. It does appear that the ancient Egyptians could recognise a hopeless case because they realised when even exorcism would be pointless (Sauneron 1989:187).

5.2.5 Amulet objects

Healing statues and stelae were often set up in specific locations (Borghouts 1978:viii) and one would therefore presume that they were accessible by the general public. Examples of such healing objects are *cippi*, stelae and troughs.

5.2.5.1 Cippi

Cippi were Egyptian stelae decorated with images of the god Horus who was sometimes shown grasping serpents or trampling snakes and other dangerous creatures. *Cippi* date from the New Kingdom period onwards, into the Hellenistic era (Ritner (2003a:197). Although *cippi* had a prophylactic function they were also believed to be able to heal snake bites or scorpion stings. In the later Egyptian periods Horus was replaced by the god Bes. Generally the one side of the *cippus* showed Horus standing on dangerous creatures and even grasping them. The reverse of the *cippus* as well as its base and sides was inscribed with magic spells. Water poured over a *cippus* was believed to help cure snake bite. Ritner (2003a:197) explains how the stele was used. The inscriptions were apparently not read out. Instead the stele was placed in water which was believed to absorb the magical protective and healing powers of the stele. This water could then be drunk by the suffering individual (Ritner 2003a:197). Whether or not this helped the suffering individual is not mentioned.

5.2.5.2 Troughs

McDonald (1989:125) mentions two Mesopotamian troughs or basins with serpent motifs that were possibly used in rituals. One was found at Susa and the other at Tell Brak. It is suggested that they may have contained holy water and been used in a similar fashion to the Egyptian *cippi*.

5.2.5.3 Stones

Haematite is a red stone also known as Bloodstone. It was believed to be able to cure snake bites (Budge 2001:314). Jet, which is a black stone, was powdered and burnt in order to repel snakes (Budge 2001:316). Another useful stone to the ancient people was Serpentine, a green-speckled stone. It was used as an amulet against snake bite (Budge 2001:324). Petrie (1972:52) also mentions Serpentine as an amulet against snake bites. In addition he mentions limestone as an anti-venom agent. In addition to being intended to cure physical ailments, incantations and other forms of amulets were used to help psychological issues. Fear of snakebite is one such ailment listed by Geller (2010a:37). The amulets could take the form of stones or medicinal plants which could be worn around the neck in a pouch.

5.2.6 The *Brooklyn Papyrus* and Egyptian principles of treating snake bite

The *Brooklyn Papyrus* (47.218.48 and 85) is essentially the handbook or manual of the priests of the snake-scorpion goddess Selqet. It currently resides in the Brooklyn Museum. The papyrus provides a wealth of information on how snake bites were treated in ancient Egypt. It is referred to by Sauneron (1989:188) as primarily a collection of recipes. Space will unfortunately not allow an in-depth examination in this study and so I have tried to present the most important treatment ideas here or at least give a brief overview.

5.2.6.1 Treatment scenarios

The papyrus text distinguishes between four different scenarios each of which determines the choice of treatment. In the first scenario specific treatments are applied to snake-bite wounds in which the snake has been identified. In the second scenario the treatment is according to the bite appearance, in the cases where the snake has not been identified. Thirdly, decisions on treatment could be made by examination of the

bite wound, without consideration given to the type of snake. Lastly, treatment could be determined not by the type of snake that bit but rather according to the symptoms of envenomation (Sauneron 1989:180).

Sauneron (1989:181) comments that one is struck by the quantities of emetics¹⁴² used in treatments. It was believed that the venom that entered the body had to be rejected. Inducement of repeated vomiting seemed to be a popular method of attempting to get the body to reject venom.

5.2.6.2 Internal and external treatment

The ancient Egyptians treated snake bite internally and externally (Sauneron 1989:181). Internal treatment would refer to treatments taken to treat the internal effects of envenomation whilst external treatments would refer to treatment of the bite wound itself. Internal treatments involved the absorption of oral medications (solids or liquids) by swallowing. External treatments could take the form of wound debridement, bandaging, placement of poultices, massage or fumigation (Sauneron 1989:181). Treatment recipes were grouped according to their nature, for example: potions, bandaging. In some cases the treatment for internal and external use was the same (Sauneron 1989:182). So if, for example, you were required to ingest a specific substance, that substance would be applied to the bite wound simultaneously. Sauneron (1989:182) adds that there were not many of these instances though. In one example given, the wound was bandaged and after three days a potion was given to the sufferer to restore physical strength (Sauneron 1989:182).

It appears that several methods of treatment could be applied concurrently. These treatments include wound dressings, potions, fumigation and the wearing of amulets. The initiative regarding treatment was left to the practitioner it seems, as suggested by the assortment of possibilities offered by the medical compendium (Sauneron 1989:182). ‘Fumigation’ seems to refer to the burning of incense or other substances.

¹⁴² An emetic is a substance that is ingested to cause vomiting.

5.2.6.3 *Methods of external treatment*

a. Wound dressing. Wound dressings in my opinion would most likely have consisted of antiseptic agents, gauze, bandaging and compresses. A compress was applied directly on top of the wound and did not necessarily require a bandage. A compress could involve pulverised medicinal compounds which were sprinkled or placed on the bite wound (Sauneron 1989:182-183). Mention is made of the application of a clay plaster, although it is not clear if just the bite wound is covered or the patient's entire body (Sauneron 1989:183).

b. Applying of ointments. Ways of applying the ointments seems to have been important as reference is made to gentle rubbing (as opposed to massage) (Sauneron 1989:184). This can be referred to as soft friction. Some prescriptions refer to covering the whole body with ointment, whilst alternative prescriptions indicate just the sufferer's head or wounded portion of the body have ointment rubbed in.

c. Massage. Massaging the body was part of external treatment (Sauneron 1989:184). An example is given in the instance where the sufferer is bitten by the red *henep-serpent*. A certain type of dressing was applied to the bite wound which was also fumigated. An invocation was spoken with the treatment. The injured limbs were massaged and fumigation continued.

d. Debridement of the wound.¹⁴³ This was another method of external treatment (Sauneron 1989:184). One recommended method of healing was to make cuts in the wound to allow it to bleed. Three mentions of this are made in the text. If one was bitten by a male viper the wound should be cut and debrided (Sauneron 1989:184). Another recommendation after being bitten by a male snake was to make repeated cuts and then apply a dressing with a compound of ingredients. In another recommendation the cutting of the wound only took place after various treatment procedures had been applied and vomiting had taken place (Sauneron 1989:184). Sauneron (1989:184) notes that nowhere is there a mention of sucking the wound or burning it with fire.

¹⁴³ Wound debridement involves the removal of dead or damaged tissue in order to promote the healing of healthy tissue (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debridement). [Accessed 21 September 2013].

e. Fumigation. Fumigation is sometimes prescribed as treatment (Sauneron 1989:185). It could be in addition to earlier treatments and does not appear to be a treatment used on its own. It generally follows the application of wound dressing or occurs along with limb massage. It is a complementary procedure used liberally and could be used repeatedly until healing or until the seventh day after the bite had taken place (Sauneron 1989:185). Incantations repeated during fumigation could include mythological elements. The fumigation aspect of treatment has apotropaic value. In my opinion the inclusion of mythology into the invocations elevates the healing process to the realm of the gods (cf 5.2.3). One could consider that the fire used to burn the incense or other products incorporates sympathetic magic by opposing the fiery pain of the bite wound. Fumigations tend to accompany exorcisms as they were believed to fulfil both a magical and physical role and it was believed that incantations or words recited during incense burning served to reinforce the action of the ritual (Sauneron 1989:187).

5.2.6.4 Methods of internal treatment

Methods of internal treatment refer to substances believed to be of medicinal value that could be chewed, swallowed or inhaled.

- Emetics were substances that could be chewed and spat out or swallowed (Sauneron 1989:196). Their purpose was to induce vomiting. Sometimes a substance was chewed, spat out and then inhaled (Sauneron 1989:186). Presumably it was burned and then the smoke inhaled.
- One recipe required the inhalation of an onion and ‘bois à serpent’ (Sauneron 1989:186), which translates as ‘wood of the serpent’, so presumably it was some kind of plant. It was believed that these two plants destroyed venom in the lungs. The lungs are one set of body organ that are affected by neurotoxic bites (O’Shea 2005:21).

5.2.7 Medicinal ingredients, compounds and cures

5.2.7.1 Mesopotamian compounds

In ancient Mesopotamia various plant ingredients were mixed with other substances in an attempt to heal snake bites as indicated by McDonald (1989:38). These include: the *im-ḥur-līmu* plant and heliotrope mixed in wine; calendula infused in beer; and *cyperus* root (McDonald 1989:38). Tamarisk was also used (McDonald 1989:148). A plant named *lišān kalbi* (which translates as ‘dog’s tongue’) was used as an agent to help cure snake bites (Geller 2010a:197). According to Geller (2010b:18) one particular Babylonian text, namely BAM 176 11’-15’, refers to a medicinal mixture that contains thirteen components as an antidote for snakebite. The medicinal compound is mixed in wine and drunk by the sufferer.

Another Babylonian text (BAM 42:63-68) lists various antidotes for snake-bite venom as follows:

Table 11: Babylonian antidotes for snake-bite venom

Component	Method of treatment
Roots of rushes (roasted)	To be eaten
<i>Imhur-lim</i> plant (crushed in beer)	To be drunk
<i>Imhur-lim</i> plant and <i>šunū</i>	To be eaten
<i>šašumtu</i> -plant and <i>kamkadu</i> (crushed, in water)	To be drunk
<i>Anatahšu</i> -plant (crushed)	Rub onto snake-bite wound
<i>Tarmuš</i> -plant (mixed in beer)	To be drunk
Male mandrake plant (burnt over coals and crushed)	No method specified

The Mesopotamians apparently, like the Egyptians, used fumigations as part of their healing process (Contenau 1938:162). They accompanied prayers, sacrifices and rituals, and seemed to be intended to reinforce these treatment practices. Various substances such as plants with fermented or rotten flour were used in poultices for wounds. Although Contenau (1938:162) does not mention these treatment methods specifically in conjunction with snake bite treatments, we can see similarities with Egyptian practices in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* regarding the use of fumigation and the application of poultices.

5.2.7.2 *Egyptian preparations from the Brooklyn Papyrus*

Sauneron (1989:189) was interested in understanding what types of medicines were used in dealing with snake bite and what type of products the healer had in his pharmacopeia. Products used in preparations during the Pharaonic era can be classified according to their type or origin: animal, vegetable, mineral and liquid. To my mind liquids can contain any of the former. Sauneron (1989:189) believed that understanding the range of products may theoretically aid us in understanding their possible efficacy. He felt that the development of chemistry led us to lose sight of the value of ancient medicines derived directly from nature.

Products of animal origin are discussed by Sauneron (1989:189-191). Some were commonly used. Burnt hooves and dried droppings were used from the ass or donkey. Russet-coloured goats are mentioned and were used for their fat, milk and gall. In one passage apparently mention is made of a young female goat from which blood is obtained. The kid was then rested and returned, alive, to its mother (Sauneron 1989:189). Cat's blood enters a number of compositions (Sauneron 1989:190). The cat of Heliopolis was used in mythology to slaughter the serpent-demon Apophis. I wonder if the cat's blood wasn't considered a potent antidote to snake venom, particularly if venom was considered to be a hostile entity. Black or russet-coloured bulls were utilised for their fat, gall, blood, lungs and dung (Sauneron 1989:190). Interestingly mention is twice made of the use of cobra blood in wound dressings (Sauneron 1989:190). Sauneron comments that this is a curious practice as he says that cobra blood is toxic and produces the same effect as venom, and by using it in a dressing it will effectively mix with human blood. However, adds Sauneron (1989:190), it also contains antitoxins which are antivenin substances. This concept, to my mind, seems like a form of sympathetic magic. Mention is made of the use of two types of fish. Firstly, the mullet, whose blood, tongue, teeth and excrement were used. The use of the parts of the other fish (the *chena*'-fish) is not clear. Kite blood and fly droppings were also commonly used (Sauneron 1989:190). Parts of other animals were less commonly used. Sauneron (1989:191) mentions the following: hippopotamus fat, ostrich eggs, and the blood, liver, horns, and neck of the fallow deer. The water salamander and lizards were split in two and used seemingly for their blood. The Nile turtle was used for its leather and excrement.

Mention of vegetable matter, according to Sauneron (1989:192) is vast. Examples of trees used for ingredients include acacia, date palm, willow, sycamore, moringa, jujube and the *itjérou*-plant (*Capparis decidua*). Common plants utilised include bryony, carob, cucumbers, squash or melon, cumin, spelt, flax, mallow, castor, reeds, valerian¹⁴⁴ and other unidentifiable plant species (Sauneron 199:192). Bitter gourd is mentioned by Sauneron (1989:193) as a plant used in the struggle against serpents, although the reason is not apparent. The most important plant used in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* recipes as a remedy against venom appears to have been the onion (Sauneron 1989:193).

Several products of mineral origin were used in snake bite remedies: salt, natron¹⁴⁵, lead oxide, copper filings, red ochre¹⁴⁶, alum¹⁴⁷ and clay. Sauneron (1989:193) says that the neutralising effect of certain minerals and metalloids on venom was known in classical antiquity. Certain minerals are chelators, explains Sauneron (1989:193), which means that there is a chemical reaction between these substances and certain components of venoms, and they are therefore somehow able to mitigate the effect of venom by neutralising it.

Liquids provided the medium in which various substances could be mixed or dissolved. Liquids mentioned by Sauneron (1989:193) include: water, water exposed to the night dew, rain water and fresh water. Other liquids mentioned are: wine, milk and oil. Fermented liquids such as beer made an appearance (Sauneron 1989:194). Such liquids, notes Sauneron (1989:194) were important.

In the recipes in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* these natural products were used in a number of ways. They may be required to be crushed or powdered. Several types of preparation are described (Sauneron 1989:194-195). A product was generally ground and mixed in a liquid which was usually beer, wine, water, oil or some other fermented liquid. The process of making the medicinal compound was usually a two-step process. First the compound or substance was finely ground to a paste. It was

¹⁴⁴ Valerian is an antispasmodic and has a calming effect on the heart (Sauneron 1989:193).

¹⁴⁵ The main constituents of natron are sodium chloride, sodium sulphate, sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate. Nunn (1996:145) explains that it would have been used under bandages to draw out fluid and thereby reduce swelling.

¹⁴⁶ Red ochre is hydrated iron oxide and clay (Nunn 1996:146).

¹⁴⁷ Alum is potassium /aluminium sulphate /hydroxide (Nunn 1996:146).

then boiled in wine or beer. Alternatively the ground dry mixture could be added to a liquid. Sometimes the product was ground until it dried before adding it to the liquid. There were many diverse uses for these medicinal mixtures. They could be used as ointments, or applied to the wound under a bandage or dressing. They could also be taken orally (Sauneron 198:195). It is noted that recipes gave precise quantities and often mentioned the temperatures at which treatments should be used, as well as the duration of treatment (Sauneron 1989:197).

Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise (2005:141) comment that frequent vomiting seems to have been the recommendation for ridding oneself of the venom of the horned viper. The *Brooklyn Papyrus* does not mention how the vomiting was to be induced for this particular snake. It does however give a recipe for the inducement of vomiting when bitten by a black-hooded cobra: a mixture of salt, garlic and beer is strained and swallowed. One is then required to vomit for four successive days! (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:143).

A compress of desert sand, moistened, could be placed on a snake bite to draw the venom out, according to the *Brooklyn Papyrus* (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:35). Various preparations were made with fat or beeswax to help prevent linen swabs from adhering to wounds. Included in the preparations were plants and plant substances intended to treat the complaint. For snake bite the following could be used: jujube or sycamore (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:37). The ash of jujube was mixed with onion and vinegar and used as an anti-inflammatory agent (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:39).

Not only plant material but also mineral substances were used on snakebites. Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise (2005:39) relate that the *Brooklyn Papyrus* mentions scraps of copper being used with the intention of reducing the strength of the snake venom.

It would seem that the preparations were generally prepared by the specialist priests of Selqet. One could drink oil as an emergency measure while the priest was being located to prepare the specific medicinal compounds (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:143).

An example of medicinal substances being used as a poultice for a man bitten by a snake is found in recipe 94 (Sauneron 1996:126). A plaster is made of barley flour, coloquinte, beef fat, seeds of the *djas*-plant, salt of the north and honey. The ingredients are finely ground and mixed with presumably a liquid of sorts.¹⁴⁸ The mixture is applied as a 'bandage' to the body.

5.2.7.3 Egyptian wound cleansing and water

Pinch (2006:134) explains how a snake bite wound was cleansed. The priest would cut the wound open and cleanse it with water that had been poured over a *cippus*. A bread poultice could be placed over the wound in the hope of drawing out the poison. There were also statues and stelae which had basins for holding water. Onto the statues and stelae were inscribed magical inscriptions (spells) and also magical iconography. Water was poured over these and into the basin. The water was then believed to hold magical healing powers specifically intended for use in healing snake bites and scorpion stings (Pinch 2006:70).

5.2.7.4 Syro-Palestinian compounds

Finding information on medicinal compounds in general, (never mind specifics such as snake bite remedies) utilised during the Bronze Age in Syria-Palestine, is tricky. As we are well aware, very little in the way of written evidence has survived. One is therefore reliant on information gleaned from later writings, such as information found in Biblical and even Talmudic sources. The hope is that some of this information has been passed down over many generations in folklore from the Bronze Age and was still in use during the Iron Age and beyond.

Both plant and animal remedies are mentioned in the Bible and *Talmud*. According to the *Shabbath* of the *Talmud*, squashed gnats could be used on snakebites (Rosner 1993:2). Indeed in *Shabbath 77b* crushed mosquitos are advocated for snakebite. Leeks and onions were used on bites and both have anti-biotic properties (Jacob: 1993:36-37). Mandrake is another plant mentioned by Jacob (1993:41) as being an antidote for poison. It is also mentioned by Harrison (1966:10) as being used for treating snake bite in its pulverised form (cf Table 11 for Mesopotamian use of

¹⁴⁸ The word is missing from the text.

mandrake). Hyssop was a valuable medicinal plant that was believed to be a preventative and curative with regards to bites from poisonous creatures (Harrison 1966:45).

5.3 USE OF THE SNAKE IN HEALING

The use of the snake in healing could follow one of three different courses:

- The serpent, serpent deity or deity with serpent aspects or associations could be invoked or used in an incantation.
- The snake could be used in sympathetic magic.
- Parts of the snake could be used in healing recipes.

Regarding the second point above, according to Currid (1997:148), the Egyptians used sympathetic magic to cure the negative effects of snake bite. This same attitude is apparent in Syria-Palestine and finds relevance in the use of the bronze serpent by the Israelites. Currid (1997:149) feels that the belief in Syria-Palestine was received from Egyptian beliefs as, aside from the use of the bronze serpent image by the Israelites, no other evidence for this practice exists in the region. The serpent symbol embodied by Nehuštan may symbolise Yahweh's healing power, as suggested by Currid (1997:155). Koh (1994:133) believes that due to a lack of textual information regarding the role of the serpent deity in the Canaanite context, information must be drawn from Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources. He believes influences regarding healing serpents may have come from the Egyptian Renenutet and the Mesopotamian Ningizzida.

5.3.1 The serpent and water

Is there a link between serpents as creatures of healing and springs as places of healing? The Aramaeans referred to 'water of life' as 'snakewater' (Albright 1920:284). Life-giving water emerges from the ground as a spring. Snakes, too, emerge from the ground.

Campbell (1976:10) says 'but the serpent, too, is a lord of waters. Dwelling in the earth, among the roots of trees, frequenting springs, marshes, and water course, it glides with a motion of waves'. This comment occurs within the context of ancient Mesopotamia. Comment made by Thompson (1903:xlviii) is that water in ancient Mesopotamia was believed to have a purifying quality and was sprinkled over the sufferer at the end of an incantation ritual. Thompson (1903:lviii) mentions that water also symbolised Ea who we know had a serpent monster form (cf Chapter Four: 4.2.6). Comment by Jayne (1962:119) is that Ea was the representative of the healing qualities associated with springs. The healing connection between water, the underworld and snakes is further illustrated in information provided by Van Buren (1934:64). One of the meanings of Ningizzida's name was thought to be 'healed in the underworld with the Water of Life existing there'. This epithet incorporates a serpent deity with a chthonic nature, water and healing. Van Buren (1935-1936:54) believed that the chthonic nature of snakes is what made people believe in their powers of 'life and death, healing or destruction'.

An example of the purifying nature of water is found in an incantation from *Ti'I Tablet 'P'* where Ea says to Marduk: 'perform thy pure incantation over this water, and with thy pure exorcism cleanse and with this water sprinkle the man, son of his god...' (Thompson 1904:95).

We only need to look to the Delta region of ancient Egypt to see that snakes are associated with water here as well. Examples of serpent goddesses who have emerged from the watery marshes of the Delta are Wadjet, Isis and Renenutet. Isis has healing associations as discussed in Chapter Four.

Rowley in Koh (1994:11) suggests that the Canaanite serpent cult traditions diffused into Israelite traditions. An example of this diffusion, he says, can be seen in the naming of places such as the serpent spring referred to in Nehemiah 2:13. Near the spring 'Ain Rogel was a stone referred to as the 'stone of the creeping animal' (Koh 1994:12). Randolph Joines (1938: 92) calls 'Ain Rogel 'the Spring of the Serpent'.

Maringer (in Charlesworth 2010:254) believed that serpents had a healing connotation due to the images of snakes that had been found near healing springs. Although of

such later time period than the scope of this study (possibly from the Herodian period) I believe the Bethesda Vase is worth mentioning. I think that its discovery has some bearing on the perceived healing connection between water and snakes. The vessel is made of clay and is decorated with numerous snakes. It was found in a cistern, apparently not *in situ*, according to Charlesworth (2006:34), who believes that Bethesda in Jerusalem was a place associated with healing. He also mentions that a number of other serpent-decorated objects were found in cisterns *in situ*. This would seem to link snakes with water within a place linked to healing. In John 5:2-9 we have the story of Jesus and the healing pool of Bethesda.

Again an example of a slightly later period than the Bronze Age should be mentioned here to illustrate the serpent-spring connection. The Phoenician god of healing, Eshmun (who was associated with serpents and aligned with the Greek god of healing, Asclepius) had a number of sanctuaries that were located near rivers and springs (Jayne 1962:140).

5.3.2 Invocations

Wakeman, who comments on the widespread association between magic and snakes (1973:77) mentions the possible invocation of Tannin in the healing of King Keret.

There are several magic healing spells involving serpents from ancient Egypt. One of these is entitled 'Horus invoked by the blood of Tabichet'. Tabichet is a snake or scorpion goddess that generally only appears in magical texts according to Borghouts (1978:109). Another spell intended for conjuring a scorpion invokes Tabichet again (Borghouts 1978:73). This spell was probably intended to heal scorpion stings by calling upon the snake/scorpion goddess.

Invocations to Meretseger, Egyptian cobra goddess of the mountains around ancient Thebes, were made in an attempt to rid an individual of poison once bitten (Ghalioungui 1973:17). As the snake inflicted the bite, it was the one who was believed to be responsible for the cure and therefore was the one that was invoked. This is reminiscent of the Isis myth in which she creates the snake that bit Re and so she alone is the one who holds the key to the cure. A stele showing a three-headed

snake goddess before offerings on an altar is dedicated to Meretseger. The one dedicating the stele praises Meretseger. He apparently performed some kind of unspecified transgression and was punished by the cobra goddess. She responded to the petitioner's invocation and she healed him of his unspecified illness (Gunn 1916:86-87). This illustrates the belief that the one who bestowed the suffering was the one who was believed to hold the key to alleviating the suffering. It also shows that serpent deities were appealed to for alleviation of forms of suffering other than snake-bites.

The serpent-scorpion goddess Selqet was often called upon to alleviate respiratory disorders that resulted from scorpion stings and snake bites. Her full name was Serqet-hatyt, which, according to Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise (2005:12) meant 'one who makes the throat breathe'. Neurotoxic bites would obviously affect the victim's nervous system and therefore the ability to breathe.

5.3.3 Incantations

5.3.3.1 Mesopotamian incantations

Many Sumerian and Akkadian incantations for healing took the form of formal incantations, says Geller (2010a:27). A common aspect of the formula was a dialogue that took place between Ea (god of wisdom) and his son Marduk (divine exorcist). It has already been shown in Chapter Four that Ea had a serpent aspect and that Marduk had serpent associations. Geller (2010a:27) explains that the typical formula involved a report to Ea by Marduk on the sufferer's symptoms. Ea performed the diagnosis and provided Marduk with information for the exorcism. Details for the alleviation of suffering were in the form of a ritual to be performed (Geller 2010a:27). No doubt these actions would be carried out by the priest-healer-magician. It was therefore believed that healing was provided by the gods (Geller 2010a:29).

The serpent healing god Ningizzida is called upon in an incantation to cure fevers: 'By Ningizzida, guzalû of the wide nether World, mayest thou be exorcized!' (Van Buren 1934:69). By the same token it was believed that he was a bringer of disease so it was logical that he would be called upon to exorcise sickness demons.

5.3.3.2 *Egyptian incantations*

An Egyptian spell for conjuring a cat comes from the *Ddhr* statue, and is supplemented with information from the Metternich stele (Borghouts 1978:56). The cat has been stung by a scorpion and each part of its body is designated a deity for protection and healing. An interesting line reads ‘you cat here – your neck is the neck of Nehebkhou, prominent in the palace, who restores people to life with the work of his arms’. Here the serpent Nehebkhou is anthropomorphosized as he is given arms. He is also designated as a healer, and one who is important enough to be utilised by the royal palace.

From the *Chester Beatty V Papyrus* is a spell for driving out a migraine.¹⁴⁹ The head of the sufferer is likened to that of the deity Osiris Wennefer. On the deity’s head are ‘367 divine serpents’. These serpents spit flames at the migraine to drive it out (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:29).

5.3.4 **The use of legends**

5.3.4.1 *Legend in Mesopotamia*

Thompson (1904:xxii) tells how legend is often used and repeated by the magician during healing incantations. Ea is approached by his son Marduk who asks his advice on healing a sufferer. Ea tells Marduk what is required. The recitations by the magician need to be accompanied by ritual actions and/or amulets (Thompson 1904:xxiii, xxxi).

5.3.4.2 *Legend in Egypt*

The Celestial Serpent according to utterance 515 of the Pyramid Texts seems to play a role in rejuvenation. Part of the text reads:

‘I have found the Celestial Serpent, the daughter of Anubis, who met me with these four *nmst*-jars of hers with which the heart of the great god was refreshed on that day of awakening, and she refreshes therewith my heart for me for life; she cleanses me, she censes me’ (Faulkner 1969:190).

¹⁴⁹ According to Wikipedia a migraine is first described in the *Ebers Papyrus* which dates to approximately 1500 BCE. Migraines would therefore not appear to be a modern illness.

This celestial serpent also plays a role in utterance 548 which is a resurrection text where the king is placed at her side.

5.3.4.3 A legend from Ugarit

The legend of King Keret is a Late Bronze Age literary work found at Ugarit. The underlying theme is King Keret's need for an heir. King Keret is desperate for a wife and heir because his seven brothers have their eyes upon the throne (Margalit 1999:219). In a dream he confesses this wish to his god El. El explains that Keret must mount a military expedition to a neighbouring kingdom and give an ultimatum to its king: Keret will not besiege his kingdom if the king gives him his daughter. When Keret awakes, he takes El's advice and sets off on the expedition (Margalit 1999:222). On the way he visits the shrine of 'Ašherah and makes a promise that he will pay gold and silver to her shrine should the mission be successful. The mission is successful and Keret has his wife and heirs in due course. However, Keret forgets his promise to 'Ašherah and she vows to take revenge against the king (Margalit 1999: 224). The king falls ill and is dying. El decides to make a plan to save Keret as the other deities side with 'Ašherah and will not help to cure the king.

From clay El creates a female exorcist and into her vagina he inserts snake venom. She is brought to life as a deified soul and human blood enters her body. El then issues instructions to this being, named *š'tqt*, who then flies off to do El's bidding. She cures the king.

It is not clear what the purpose of the snake venom is but its mention in the story must have some reason. Perhaps it is seen as something to strengthen the exorcist. Consider that someone who survives a snake bite may possibly be thought of as particularly resilient. Maybe resilience was a necessary trait needed by exorcists who dealt with all manner of illnesses.

5.3.4.4 Snake venom as a modern day cure

As an aside, the concept of the insertion of the venom into the deified *š'tqt* created by El is interesting. One automatically assumes that venom has the potential to kill. In the legend of Keret *š'tqt* is imbued with venom and able to cure. Modern day science is researching and investigating the ability of venom to heal. Uses being investigated

for venom include possible cures for cancer and autoimmune diseases and to provide pain management (Holland 2013:70). Holland (2013:70) also mentions that there are certain heart and diabetes medications that have been derived from venom. Holland (2013:75) reveals that modern day research into venom as a curative agent is not that new! She mentions that venom-based cures appear in ‘2nd century AD Sanskrit texts’. A fascinating example reveals that Mithradates VI of Pontus had steppe viper venom applied to his battle wounds and this saved him (Holland 2013:75). Several other examples are included in Holland’s article. This does raise the question: did the ancients of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Syria-Palestine have an awareness of instances where venom appears to have cured, rather than killed? Or perhaps a measure of immunity gained?

5.3.5 Serpent artefacts

Serpent artefacts refer to specific items with serpent motifs that were intended for use in healing.

5.3.5.1 Nehuštan

The bronze serpent in Numbers 21 was specifically believed to provide healing rather than perform as a prophylactic or protective measure. It clearly states in Numbers 21:8: ‘...make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live’. This episode in Numbers is a very good example of using a snake to neutralise its own effects through sympathetic magic.

5.3.5.2 The ‘Ain Samiya cup

The ‘Ain Samiya¹⁵⁰ cup has already been discussed in Chapter Three (cf 3.3.1.1). Koh (1994:52) mentions that there are two streams of thought on the ‘Ain Samiya cup decoration. The one thought already mentioned (cf 3.3.1.1) is that it reflects an early version of the creation epic (Koh 1994:52). The alternative school of thought according to Levine and de Tarragon (in Koh 1994:52) is that the decoration on the cup is an illustration connected to rituals related to healing snake bite.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Ain Samiya is 24 km north of Jerusalem.

5.3.5.3 Egyptian serpent cases

An interesting group of amulets is presented by Petrie (1972:26). They comprise of bronze cases with a serpent decoration on the lid. Petrie (1972:26) mentions two possible intended functions of these amulet cases. Firstly, to facilitate delivery in child birth, and secondly, to alleviate malaria. The cases appear to have emerged around the time of the 25th Dynasty. It is suggested that the cases may have contained serpent skins (Petrie 1972: Plate XII). Interestingly Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise (2005:143) mention boxes with snake motifs on their lids were used as an amulet in the home to keep snakes out.

5.3.6 The staff

5.3.6.1 The staff as a magician's tool of power

An example of the rod or staff as a magician's tool of power is seen in the contest of power between Aaron and the magicians of the Egyptian pharaoh relayed in Exodus 7:8-13. Aaron is commanded by his god to throw his staff upon the ground in order for it to transform into a serpent. The magicians of the pharaoh perform the same act and their staffs also become snakes upon the ground. The staff of Aaron consumes the serpent staffs of the pharaoh's men. This same rod is used to perform other tasks such as turning pools of water into blood, and likewise with the river Nile it is used to kill the fish and make the water undrinkable. The inference is that the staff imbued with serpent power is a magical tool with which the magician can perform his deeds.

It is pointed out by Campbell (1976:30) that Yahweh appears to have had serpent power, and the example of the legend of Aaron's staff described above is a demonstration of that power. Campbell (1976:31) mentions that the first representations of Yahweh were as a figure with serpents for legs. These figures seem to appear on amulets or coins from the Graeco-Roman period. Some are labelled 'IAW'. Campbell (1976:274-275) associates these with Yahweh.

Currid (1997:95) mentions a text from Edfu in Egypt in which a herd of cattle is driven by a king carrying a serpent staff. In ancient Egypt it was believed that the pharaoh's or magician's rod was imbued with divine influence (Currid 1997:151). The serpent symbol associated with magicians' staffs may somehow be related to

Hekau, goddess of magic. According to Budge (1972:129) an ebony rod was part of the magician's accoutrement. He mentions that Nectanabus, a magician-king, had one, as did the Sumerian god Ningizzida in his role as physician.

The Egyptian goddess of magic, Weret Hekau, is mentioned by Pinch (2006:11) as being the power in the royal crown and the 'foster mother' to Egyptian pharaohs. Pinch believes that she may be the serpent goddess represented in magicians' staffs.

5.3.6.2 The magician's staff as a healing tool

The rod or staff is generally associated with magicians. As magicians were very often healers it could be considered as a tool of the trade, so to speak. As mentioned by Mundkur (1983:5) the serpent as a cult animal appears in the equipment of the magician as priest or healer. There does appear to be a connection between serpents and magic rods or staffs. This seems to suggest that the serpent may have been used to represent the magic power of the magician's staff. Koh (1994:134) mentions that the staff becomes a healing symbol when it is associated with snakes. Examples of the rod or staff becoming perceived of as a healing symbol when combined with the serpent are: the bronze serpent of Moses (Nehuštan), Ningizzida entwined around the axial rod, the later Greek serpent staff of Asclepius, and the modern day medical symbol.

5.3.6.3 A Mesopotamian staff

Geller (2010a:45) mentions that a rare word for an exorcist was *muššipu* and was presumably linked to snakes (*muš* = snake). This exorcist carried a curved staff.

5.3.6.4 Staffs in Ugarit

According to Spronk (1999:277) some scholars believe that the one who recited the incantation, usually an exorcist priest, carried a magic staff.

5.3.6.5 The magician's staff from the Ramesseum

In the late 1800s James Quibell was excavating at the Ramesseum¹⁵¹ at ancient Thebes when he found what appears to have been a magician's tomb (David 2004:135). The tomb, dating to around 1900 BCE, contained a wooden box of medico-magical papyri, hymns and texts and other magician's equipment. Amongst this equipment were two important items linked to serpents. The first was a snake wand made of bronze. The second was a female figure whose face was covered with a Beset mask (David 2004:136). In each hand she holds a serpent. David (2004:136) thinks that this figurine may have represented the magician's female assistants.¹⁵²

5.3.6.6 Further examples of Egyptian serpent staffs

The Egyptian god Amun had a serpent-shaped sceptre in the underworld.



Figure 43: The god Amun with his serpent staff¹⁵³

Another god with serpent staffs was Ptah in his role as lord of the magicians.



Figure 44: Ptah with serpent staffs¹⁵⁴

Nekhebet in her role as a cobra goddess also carried a serpent staff.

¹⁵¹ The Ramesseum is the mortuary temple of Ramesses II who reigned from approximately 1279 to 1213 BCE (Oakes 2006:184).

¹⁵² David (2004:136) mentions a similar figure found at Kahun dating to approximately the same time period. Kahun was the town of the workmen who toiled on the pyramids (David 2004:136).

¹⁵³ Budge (1972:166).

¹⁵⁴ Budge (1972:158).



Figure 45: The cobra goddess Nekhebet with her serpent staff¹⁵⁵

5.3.6.7 *The Mount Karkom engraving*

Koh (1994:52-53) describes a rock engraving at Mount Karkom in the Negev showing a staff and a serpent. It seems to date to the Intermediate (Early Bronze IV to Middle Bronze I) Bronze period. Koh (1994:53) suggests that it may reflect the awareness of the legend of Aaron's rod being turned into a staff. Koh (1994:68) feels that the interpretation of the staff and the serpent is not clear but may be linked to herding or leadership. I suggest that it may even be a status symbol of a magician or priest.

5.3.7 Medicinal compounds

According to Avalos (1995:341) snakes had a medicinal value. There are a number of examples where the snake itself was used as part of a medicinal compound for healing. It may be the flesh, blood, other body parts or skin that was used.

5.3.7.1 *Theriac*

Theriac, says Watson (1966:4-5) was an antidote believed to counteract the effects of venom from creatures such as snakes and scorpions. It could also be used to counteract the effects of bites from spiders and rabid dogs. It is mentioned by McDonald (1989:173) that it was believed by the Mesopotamians that drinking a potion in which snake flesh had been infused would enable the person to take on some of the qualities of the snake.

¹⁵⁵ Budge (1972:91).

Mithradates was a late 1st millennium BCE ruler who is reported to have perfected an antidote to venom and poisons. This concoction was called theriac (Geller 2010a:115). The theriac of Mithradates was not the first however. Geller (2010a:115) tells of the Mesopotamian Antiochus II (2nd millennium BCE) who apparently developed a theriac.

McDonald (1989:40) informs us that a common generic Akkadian word for snake was ‘šēru’ which also refers to a jug of wine. Deuteronomy 32:33 reads: ‘...their wine is the poison of serpents, and the cruel venom of asps’.

In the quotation from Deuteronomy ‘their’ seems to refer to the non-followers of Yahweh, in my opinion. The wine is not literally made of snake venom. However, if the wine does contain snake blood, which may have been perceived to have therapeutic value, the words of the song are intended to deride the theriac of the non-believers by equating it with that which kills (venom) versus that which heals.

A variation on the translation, taken from Tigay (1996:311), reads: ‘their wine is the venom of asps, the pitiless poison of vipers’. According to commentary in Tigay (1996:311) the text means that the enemies of God will succumb to the same fate as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah because they will drink wine made from the same vineyards. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were believed to symbolise godlessness (Biddle 2003:479) and the enemies of Yahweh were aligned with them.

McDonald, in her study (1989:164) believes that pottery with snake motifs was probably associated with use in rituals and may have contained libation liquids. Although there is no concrete evidence she suggests that a use for these vessels may have been a precursor for theriac. This substance may have contained viper flesh. McDonald (1989:165) describes theriac as a ‘viper-wine’ remedy to counter the effects of snake bite. Presumably this was a form of sympathetic magic. She adds that wine formed the basic ingredient of theriac. Various other ingredients were added to this such as herbs and mineral substances. It may be that vipers were either boiled in the concoction or viper flesh added to the mixture (McDonald 1989:165). She also mentions that the wine snake (*muš.giš.geštin*) was used in healing tonics and potions (McDonald 1989:174).

McDonald (1989:109) feels that the vessels bearing serpent iconography from Tell Asmar may have been used as libation vessels in religious ceremonies. Due to the number of such vessels studied by McDonald from this site she believes that a snake cult existed there. Many of these vessels were found in shrines (McDonald 1989:109) and they appear to date to the Early Bronze Age (see Table 1, McDonald 1989:100). A number of appliqué snakes were found at Teleilat Ghassul which McDonald (1989:112) presumes came off vessels. Examples of vessels with snakes dating to Middle Bronze Age II (MBII) come from Megiddo (McDonald 1989:112) and were found in tombs. Other MBII examples were found at Beth Shemesh, Jericho, Hazor and Gaza (McDonald 1989:112). There are numerous examples of snakes on vessels from ancient Iran, particularly Susa.

McDonald (1989:149) mentions that vessels may have been decorated in such a manner as to indicate what the contents were or were used for. These vessels would therefore contain medicinal substances such as herbal, animal or mineral compounds and may have contained snake parts or been used to attempt to heal snake bites.

The primary reason cited by McDonald (1989:169) for the use of theriac as a general tonic may be the association of the snake with rejuvenation. It was believed that immortality was even possible. This concept is linked to the snake's ability to shed its skin to provide a shiny new exterior. In the Gilgamesh epic Gilgamesh retrieves the plant of immortality which is stolen by a snake (Dalley 2000:119). The epic relays how the serpent ingests the plant, shed its skin and is rejuvenated. 'A serpent came up and smelled the fragrance of the plant, came up [from the wa]ter and took the plant; on its return it shed (its) slough'. (Albright 1920:278).

In my opinion McDonald's suggestion, based on the evidence above, could well be accurate in that whatever the vessels contained were early forms of theriac, a healing tonic popular in the European Middle Ages, and that the origins of the theriac of the Middle Ages does in fact trace back to ancient Mesopotamia.

5.3.7.2 *The link between wine and serpents*

There is a link between wine and serpents in ancient Mesopotamia that would support McDonald's theory. Already mentioned is 'šēru'¹⁵⁶ referring to a snake or jug of wine (McDonald 1989:40) and *muš.giš.geštin* meaning a wine snake (McDonald (1989:38). Albright (1920:276) makes reference to the Sumerian word *muš-geštin* as a wine snake. I would speculate that this 'wine snake' may be a certain species of snake that was perhaps commonly found in vineyards and as such may have been the snake of choice for theriac or Mesopotamian potions.

To take the wine-serpent association further: the consort of the serpent god Ningizzida was Geštianna. Geštianna, according to Leick (1998:67) means 'lady of the grape vine'. She was prominent in the Sumerian city of Lagaš, the city of King Gudea. She was associated with the correct growth of trees through their leaves. Ningizzida himself was linked to wine according to an ancient Tablet which describes him as the bringer of fermented drink (Van Buren 1934:62).

In the Gilgamesh epic we find Siduri-Sabitu in the vineyard (Albright 1920:259). Siduri¹⁵⁷ is also referred to as a 'goddess of wisdom' and a 'genius of life' (Albright 1920:259). Albright aligns Siduri with Geštianna so that she, too, is a lady of the vines. The vineyard in the Gilgamesh epic is her abode. In Siduri's nymph form Albright (1920:274) aligns her with snake nymphs that protect the vineyards. He also compares Siduri with a goddess named Ninkasi whose offspring are referred to as the 'nine spirits of alcohol' and were the 'snake-charmers of heaven' (Albright 1920:275). Therefore there seems to be a link between alcohol and snake charmers.

Albright (1920:276) outlines the similarities between wine and serpents which may explain the connectedness between their symbolism and why they are associated with each other. They are both representatives of life and wisdom. Albright (1920:276) refers to an example in Proverbs 23:31-32 that reads 'look thou not upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the

¹⁵⁶ Šēru may be the word from which 'serum' derives. One of the definitions of 'serum' on Wikipedia is 'any drug derived from an animal's blood or serous fluid' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serum>) Accessed 12 October 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Siduri is the equivalent of the Semitic Bêlit-çêri, a lady of the underworld (Albright 1920:264).

last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder'. The implication is that serpents can unexpectedly turn around and bite – just like wine!

Other similarities cited by Albright (1920:279) are as follows:

- Vineyards and serpents seem to visibly renew themselves. The vines regenerate lush new leaves after pruning, and the snakes shed its skin.
- Vines and snakes are very similar in appearance as they wind themselves around branches.
- In the old Sumerian language *muš* was used to refer to a snake as well as a tree. 'Giš' later replaced 'muš' as the word for tree.

If the grape from which wine is made is the fruit of the tree of wisdom, then it seems logical to me that the tree of wisdom may well have been a grape vine. Albright (1920:284) refers to Hawwa (Eve) as a serpent goddess. He aligns her with Siduri.

Even the ancient Egyptians seemed to link wine and snakes. Specifically shrines were erected to the cobra goddess Renenutet in fields where the grape presses were located (Leibovitch 1953:76).



Figure 46: Offering to Renenutet¹⁵⁸

5.3.7.3 Reference to cooking serpents in the Pyramid Texts

An interesting line emerges in an utterance or spell from the Pyramid Texts. Utterance 240 is a spell intended to protect the deceased from snakes that may enter the tomb. Part of the utterance which addresses a snake reads: 'My eye is on you, O you who

¹⁵⁸ Viceroy of Kush, Setau, makes an offering to Renenutet. Sandstone stele from Wadi Halfa dating to 19th Dynasty. British Museum ref EA 1055. Photograph: Wendy Golding: 2011.

are in your *n3wt*-bush, and you are dragged off, O you who are in your cavern, O cooking pot of Horus which pervades the earth!’ (Faulkner 1969:57). Faulker (1969:57) interprets the snake as being in the cooking pot. Although this is a spell it does provoke the thought that maybe snakes were cooked in pots for some reason.

5.3.7.4 *Serpent parts in Mesopotamian prescriptions*

McDonald (1989:38) mentions the use of snakes as part of the ingredients in Sumerian prescriptions:

- Snake was used in a recipe called *muš.hul* to ease labour pains.
- The wine snake (*muš.giš.geštin*) was used in healing tonics.
- A drug incorporating a black snake’s tongue and flesh.

McDonald (1989:172) mentions lists of medicinal substances. The lists date to the 1st millennium BCE and in one list is a mention of powdered snake. The ailment for which this ingredient is used is not mentioned however. Powdered snake could be infused with wine sediment (McDonald 1989:24).

McDonald cites further examples of remedies which include snake parts as follows:

- *Daddiru*¹⁵⁹ plant infused in wine-snake.
- *Sadānu*¹⁶⁰ plant preparation which includes the flesh or blood of a black snake.
- Black snake fat.
- *Kalzallu* plant mixed with the tongue of a red or multi-coloured snake.

It appears that these preparations may well not have been intended to have a curative effect on the sufferer but perhaps rather intended to either repel a disease-causing demon or appease it (McDonald 1989:172). Many of these remedies were often mixed with liquids such as grape or date wine, beer, fats or vinegar (McDonald 1989:172-173). The idea of some of these ingredients being used as repellents is seen in Contenau (1938:162). Within the Mesopotamian pharmacopoeia were substances that were believed to be nauseating and disgusting to the malady-causing demons.

¹⁵⁹ A thorny plant that smells or tastes bad (McDonald 1989:178).

¹⁶⁰ This plant is intended for medicinal use (McDonald 1989:178).

Contenau (1938:162) informs us that certain texts record the name of certain plants in the first column, and in the second column appears the names of specific substances with which they are mixed in order to repel the sickness demon. Examples of such substances are pig tail, rancid fat, and viper fat. Here the snake is used to help rid the sufferer of the sickness and thereby promote healing. It is not the properties of the viper fat (or other disgusting ingredients) that caused healing, but rather it was perceived that the substance was so revolting that it would frighten the sickness away.

An example of a potion intended to cure jaundice is given by McDonald (1989:173). The sufferer drinks wine in which a type of 'field serpent' has been baked.

5.3.7.5 Egyptian compounds with serpent ingredients

Brier (2001:65-66) explains that some Egyptian potions included unsavoury ingredients such as snake urine in order to frighten off the evil spirits that were believed to cause disease. The Mesopotamians and Egyptians seemed to display the same concept of using unsavoury ingredients to frighten off demons that bring sickness.

Avalos (1995:341) reveals that snakes were 'recommended for their medicinal value'. Various skin conditions were believed to be curable using animal products. Mentioned in the *Ebers Papyrus* was the following: the fat of a black snake was recommended for weeping sores and ulcers, whilst snake fat could be added to castor oil to combat baldness (Ghalioungui 1973:133-134). Another recipe from the *Ebers Papyrus* to combat baldness and promote hair growth involved the mixture of fats from a snake, cat, crocodile, hippo, lion and ibex (Halioua, Ziskind & DeBevoise 2005:99).

Recipe 90c from the *Brooklyn Papyrus* requires the following ingredients to be finely ground together: cat blood, mugil fish blood, kite blood, cobra blood, blood of the lizard which has been split in two and dried, and amber. The mixture was used as a compress on a snake bite wound (Sauneron 1989:122).

5.3.7.6 *An Israelite prescription*

As Jacob (1993:27) says: ‘we may assume that much of the medicinal and other horticultural information presented by the *Talmud* is valid for the earlier biblical period’. This can be based on the fact that the *Talmud* provides interpretation of Biblical text (Jacob 1993:28). The Hebrew Bible gives us insight into Canaanite culture. Although treatments in the *Talmud* may not necessarily be a true reflection of Israelite treatments, they may provide possibilities as to treatments from the earlier periods. *Shabbath 77b* of the *Babylonian Talmud* recommends boiling a black snake and a white snake to a pulp and rubbing the resultant mixture into eruptions. Presumably an ‘eruption’ refers to some kind of skin lesion or a boil.

5.3.8 **The stele as an amulet of healing.**

The god Canaanite Rešeph is commonly depicted in Egyptian art as a menacing god with a weapon such as a sword or spear (Cornelius 1994:57). As a war god he was shown in a chariot or on horseback. In some iconography he stands holding his spear in a non-menacing pose. In this instance he stands to one side of the goddess (often Qudšu). He stands facing her. On her other side is the god Min. Generally the goddess holds snakes on the side of Rešeph.

Examples catalogued by Cornelius (1994:59-64) where serpents are held towards Rešeph by the goddess are as follows:

- A limestone stele found at Deir el Medina.¹⁶¹ It dates to approximately the 19th Dynasty, the time of Ramesses II (1290-1224 BCE). The deities depicted are Min, Qudšu and Rešeph.
- A limestone stele found at Deir el Medina which is now housed in the Louvre, catalogue number C86 (N.237). It dates to approximately the 19th Dynasty (1300-1200 BCE). The deities depicted are Min, Qudšu and Rešeph.
- A limestone stele presumed to be from Deir el Medina, now housed in the British Museum under catalogue number BM 191. The stele dates to

¹⁶¹ New Kingdom Egyptian village which housed the workmen and the families that worked on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

approximately the 19th Dynasty (1300-1200 BCE). The deities depicted are Min, Qudšu and Rešeph with Anat below them.

- A limestone stele found at Deir el Medina, now located in the British Museum, catalogue number BM 355. It also dates to the 19th Dynasty (1300-1200 BCE). The deities depicted are Min, Qudšu and Rešeph.

These are all votive stelae (Cornelius 1994:68) therefore forming a part of personal religion of people who lived at Deir el Medina. As Rešeph is not brandishing his weapons in a menacing fashion he cannot be fulfilling the role of a menacing god as described by Cornelius (1994:47). The serpents and lilies symbolise immortality and resurrection so the purpose of the votive stelae may well be to ensure well-being and even hold a prophylactic value. Bear in mind that they were found at Deir el Medina where the serpent goddess Meretseger formed part of an important local cult during the same period. These stelae may well have been intended to reinforce well-being and recovery in the case of snake bite.

5.3.9 The healing temple and serpents

Ancient people often visited temples for healing purposes. Here they were able to make offerings and petition certain deities. The deity associated with a temple linked to healing would be considered to be one that had healing powers. Avalos (1995:29) provides a definition of a healing deity as one whose primary function is healing, or has healing as one of the primary functions. Healing deities had a temple or were linked to a temple where the following activities, according to Avalos (1995:30) could take place:

- The temple provided a location where the individual could petition the deity for healing or an oracle.
- The temple was a place that the individual could go to in order to receive exorcism or medical care.
- The temple was a place where one could go to give thanks for healing.

The temple as a healing location seems to pertain to ancient Israel although healing also took place in the home. In Mesopotamia the primary healing location was the

home (Avalos 1995:172). Secondary to this appears to have been the river (Avalos 1995:182). In Mesopotamia any deity could be responsible for sending suffering. Therefore any responsible deity was part of the healing solution, not just the deity who specialised in healing.

5.3.9.1 An Egyptian serpent healing temple

The Egyptian cobra goddess Neith had a temple at Sais. The temple had a reputation for its doctors (Pinch 2006:101). It apparently had a medical school attached to it (Jayne 1962:72).

5.3.9.2 Healing temples in Syria-Palestine

A therapeutic function may have been attached to shrines and temples in ancient Israel up until the late 8th century BCE (Avalos 1995:395). The bronze serpent appears to have had a tradition of being associated with healing in Mosaic times. A number of bronze serpents have been found in possible sacred areas in Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Lachish, Tell Mecerach, Timna and Sechem (Avalos 1995:339-340).

The Temple of Jerusalem had a shrine incorporating a bronze serpent. Rowley (1939:139) believes that Nehuštān was a Jebusite¹⁶² symbol. Rowley (1939:137) believes the bronze serpent to have been Canaanite in origin and that it ‘...represented a Canaanite god older than the Israelite occupation of Jerusalem’. He adds that Nehuštān was therefore already being worshipped by the Jebusites of Jerusalem when the city was captured by David. Rowley (1939:137) goes on to suggest that Nehuštān was kept in a shrine of Zadok. Zadok is referred to as a priest of the Jebusite shrine prior to the time of David (Rowley 1939:123, 140). Rowley (1939:139) goes on to say that it may well have been a charm (an amulet) during plagues. A bronze serpent that we associate with the Mosaic Nehuštān was placed within the Temple of Jerusalem. Its use as an amulet for healing and its placement within the Temple of Jerusalem indicates that the Temple was visited for healing purposes. Indeed Pedersen in Avalos (1995:337) comments that until the time of Hezekiah people could seek healing in the Temple of Jerusalem.

¹⁶² The Jebusites inhabited Jerusalem before the Israelites (Hoerth, Mattingly & Yamauchi 1998: 240).

5.3.9.3 *Healing temples in Mesopotamia*

Eight bronze serpents were found in the Babylonian temple at Esagila (Avalos 1995:339-340). Whether or not this denotes it as a place where one could petition the gods for healing is not clear. King Gudea of Lagash erected temples for the serpent god Ningizzida and his consort Geštianna, both deities being linked to wine which may have served a purpose in healing (cf 5.3.7.1). It seems a number of temples to Ningizzida were erected but it is difficult to establish whether or not these were places for healing. However, there is one temple where I suspect this may have been the case. Van Buren (1934:77) says that a temple to the goddess Bau was erected in Lagash. King Gudea introduced Ningizzida into this temple. Bau, according to Black & Green (2008:39) was most likely Baba. During the Old Babylonian period Baba became identified with goddesses of healing Inanna and Ninisinna (Leick 1998:23). To my mind this may well be because she was already associated with healing. So her temple in Lagash may have been visited by those seeking healing. The presence of Ningizzida seems to reinforce the possibility of this. Furthermore, Black & Green (2008:140) reveal that Ninisinna may well have been one and the same as Gula, who we know to have been a healing goddess *par excellence*.

The serpent god Ninazu had a temple called the Egidda. It was located at Enegi, a location between Ur and Larsa (Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey 1985:3). In Chapter Four (4.2.2) this deity was discussed and it was mentioned that according to Wilson (2001:33) Ninazu's name meant 'Lord Healer' and that he was the prototype of the West Semitic healing deity. It is highly likely, therefore, that this temple of Ninazu may have been a place visited for those in need of healing. A number of Old Babylonian incantations discussed by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:2-3) appear to have come from the kingdom of Larsa and almost half of the published incantations mentioned by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:3) concerned snake and scorpion incantations.

5.4 CONCLUSION

Treatment of snake bite occurred on a physical and psychological level. The people of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine had medicinal ingredients from natural resources to treat snake bite wounds. Both the Egyptians and Mesopotamians

employed the use of revolting ingredients intended to repel sickness demons. In addition they also used ingredients with the intent to heal the sufferer. Mesopotamians were great list-makers. We know of many of the natural animal, vegetable and mineral substances used in medicinal compounds. The information that we have in what is clearly used in the instance of snake bite from Mesopotamia is not as extensive as the information we have from the ancient Egyptians. The Egyptian *Brooklyn Papyrus* provides a wealth of information on methods of snake bite treatment, the principles involved and recipes for internal and external treatments. Snake bites were clearly such a big problem that they deemed it useful to have a manual for the priest-healers. Medicinal treatment of snake bite in Syria-Palestine is hard to find. There would have been methods of treatment but thus far I have not been able to source extant information for the Bronze Age. As a result I have had to look at examples of Biblical and Talmudic treatment. I would assume that due to the presence of the Egyptians in Syria-Palestine during the Bronze Age, the people of the region would have learned something of the Egyptian methods. The existence of snake cults is clearer in Syria-Palestine than in the other two regions so I presume if priests handled snakes they would have paid attention to treatment of bites.

Treatment of snake bite not only took place on a physical and medical level but also on a psychological level. There were many ways in which this occurred and this is where treatment enters the realm of magic and incorporates the supernatural and divine worlds. By and large venom was viewed as a sickness demon or entity that had to be exorcised from the body – this is what we can glean from the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians in any case. The modern day Iraqis view venom as a jinn or negative spirit. We do see evidence of exorcism in a text from Ugarit as well. Fumigations (the burning of substances) occurred in all three regions and could accompany exorcisms. Fumigations tended to be used as a demon repellent but could also be used as part of the healing process.

Incantations were part of the ritual process in an endeavour to heal a snake bite sufferer and were used in all three regions. Appeals to the gods seem to be quite apparent in Egyptian invocations where the gods were called upon to help. The ancient Egyptians made frequent use of mythology in their incantations and invocations. This seems to be based on the principle that in the divine realm, the

problem always appears to have been resolved, so for this reason, the sufferer was aligned with the suffering deity and the problem was transferred to the realm of the gods. The old adage ‘as it is in heaven, so it is on earth’ seems apt here! The format used by the Mesopotamians was slightly different. In the incantation the god Marduk (or Asarluhi) would take the medical problem to Ea/Enki, who would dispense advice. The priest-healer would then act on the advice received via Marduk/Asarluhi. Use of mythology or legend appears to have occurred in Syria-Palestine but does not seem as apparent in Mesopotamia with regards to healing snake bites.

Various objects were incorporated into the snake bite healing regime. In Mesopotamia it appears that troughs or basins may have been used in a similar fashion to the Egyptian *cippi*. Water associated with these objects was believed to be imbued with magical healing power which could be drunk by the sufferer or used to cleanse the bite wound. In some instances amulets to promote healing for the snake bite sufferer were worn by the ancient Egyptians, but I have not found any evidence of the same practice by the Mesopotamians or inhabitants of Syria-Palestine.

The snake, potentially a bringer of death and serious illness through snake bites, also played an opposite role in the realm of healing. The singular most powerful symbol of this role, I believe, resides in the magician’s staff. The magician was often the healer. In my opinion the collective beliefs of the people with regards to the perception of the ability of the snake to aid healing lies in this staff – which gave rise to the medical symbol of today. There were various other amulets or items associated with healing and, like the magician’s staff, played a role on the psychological level of the patient. Most notable is Nehušan, the bronze serpent associated with Moses. Other important items include the vessels found in Mesopotamia bearing snake motifs which may indicate the contents of the vessel – a tonic for healing that could have included snake blood or body parts in a base of wine. Each region seems to have a snake item associated with it for healing. The magician’s serpent staff although apparent in all three regions is most visible in ancient Egypt. In Mesopotamia it is the snake-motif vessels and in Syria-Palestine it is the bronze serpent. Bronze serpents dating to the Bronze Age were found at a number of sites in Israel in locations that were possibly sacred areas.

Regarding sacred areas, all three regions appear to have a possible healing temple linked to a serpent deity or in which a serpent image was found. The link between serpents and healing water sources is also found in all three regions. So it seems that there were two types of places that had a serpent link that one could go to for healing: a temple or a water source.

In ancient Egypt invocations to snake goddesses, such as Selqet and Meretseger, were apparent. They were specifically appealed to in the instances of snake bite. I would surmise that appeal to Meretseger was local – around the area of Deir el-Medina - as she was the patron goddess of that village, whereas appeal to Selqet was probably widespread. In Mesopotamia deities linked to serpents, such as Ningizzida or Ea or Marduk, were called upon in incantations for all kinds of ailment relief and not specifically snake bite.

The blood and body parts of the snake were used in healing. Perhaps the concept of incorporating use of snake parts involved a form of sympathetic magic. In other words by ingesting these snake substances one could take on some of the qualities of the creature. Although information regarding use of snake parts in the healing regime in Syria-Palestine is scarce, there is evidence from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt that use of snake in medicinal compounds occurred. The theory of theriac's possible origins in Mesopotamia as presented by McDonald was discussed. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia snake blood or body parts were used in medicinal compounds either as a potentially beneficial treatment or to create a disgusting mixture to repel sickness demons and aid their exorcism. In the case of the poor Egyptian sufferer this was frequently accompanied by the inducement of vomiting.

It is apparent through evidence presented in this Chapter that the snake played a role where it caused ill-health but also an opposite role where it was incorporated into the healing regime on a psychological and medicinal level.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PROTECTIVE SERPENT

6.1 PROTECTION

The very aspects of a snake that humankind fears were utilised for protective purposes. Ancient humankind knew the repercussions of a venomous snake bite. These include painful bites, tissue swelling and necrosis, internal haemorrhaging and even death. In ancient humankind's mind the venom and power of the creature that caused such catastrophe could be harnessed and put to good use. The snake's power could be used to *protect the individual or deity* against the enemy and negative entities. It was also used for the *protection of property or place*. A multitude of serpent deities were appealed to for protection and use of the snake's power in this manner was particularly prevalent in ancient Egypt.

6.2 PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN MESOPOTAMIA

A number of the serpents that had healing associations in Mesopotamia had a protective function in addition. Most information on these serpents has already been given in Chapter Four.¹⁶³ Their protective aspects will be added here along with the additional serpents that provided a protective function.

6.2.1 Ningizzida

Ningizzida served two important functions in the underworld. The first role was that of throne-bearer for dignitaries. He is invoked in a Babylonian incantation in the *Utukki limnuti* Tablet V as the throne-bearer of the earth in exorcising demons (Thompson 1904:61). The second role was that of guardian. Jacobsen & Alster (2000:316) inform us that Ningizzida acted as a guardian of those who had committed evil and had been taken captive. Black & Green (2008:139) describe this role further in saying that Ningizzida guarded the demons of the underworld.

¹⁶³ See Ningizzida (4.2.1), Tišpak (4.2.3), *mušhuššu* and Bašmu (4.2.4), Pazuzu (4.2.5) and Ištar (4.2.10).

Ningizzida was also a guardian at the door to Anu's¹⁶⁴ palace, along with Dumuzi¹⁶⁵ (Tammuz) in the myth of Adapa.¹⁶⁶ 'When he approached the Gate of Anu, Dumuzi and Gizzida were standing in the Gate of Anu' (Dalley 2000:186). It is indicated by Van Buren (1934:62) that Ningizzida may have been a neo-Sumerian form of Dumuzi. This may be because they were both vegetative deities that spent time in the underworld. On the libation cup of Gudea Ningizzida is referred to as the 'Tree of Truth'. Dumuzi has been referred to as the 'Tree of Life'. The Babylonians believed that the eastern gate of Heaven was guarded by these two trees. In effect then Ningizzida and Dumuzi stand together as guardians (Van Buren 1934:67). It is interesting to note the similarity between these two trees and those in Genesis 2:8, where amongst the many trees in the garden stood a tree of life and a tree of knowledge.

King Gudea of Lagaš¹⁶⁷ viewed Ningizzida as his personal deity of protection despite the fact that Ningursu was the patron deity of his city. One of Ningizzida's early roles was that of protector and it was after the death of Gudea that he became associated with healing (Van Buren 1934:61). It is clear that Ningizzida was a guardian of person and of place.

6.2.2 *Mušhuššu* and Bašmu

The primary function of the *mušhuššu* and Bašmu was that of protection. Babylonian texts intended for the protection of the house examined by Wiggerman give details of protective figurines that must be crafted and placed in prescribed locations. A text known as *Šep lemutti ina bit amēli parāsu* (to block the foot of evil into a man's house)¹⁶⁸ instructs the exorcist to craft two *mušhuššu* and two Bašmu figurines.

¹⁶⁴ An (Anu) was a god of authority in the Sumerian and Babylonian pantheons. He was believed to bestow kingship (Leick 1998:5-6).

¹⁶⁵ Dumuzi/Tammuz was a vegetative god of fertility who resided in the underworld for part of the year.

¹⁶⁶ Adapa was one of the seven sages sent by Ea (Enki) to bring civilization to humankind (Dalley 2000:182).

¹⁶⁷ Gudea was a king of a city named Lagaš which was situated in Sumer between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

¹⁶⁸ Translation taken from Bīt mēseri. Available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C4%ABt_m%C4%93seri. Accessed 21 December 2013.

Another version of this text instructs the Bašmu to be placed as doorkeepers and the *mušhuššu* are placed at the threshold to a room. The intention is that they protect the rooms from evil entities entering (Wiggerman 1992:15-17).

The Bašmu figures are crafted holding copper axes in their mouths. This point and the fact that they are positioned as door keepers make for an interesting comparison with Ningizzida. Firstly Van Buren (1934:70) informs us that the axe appears to have been one of Ningizzida's symbols. Frothingham (1916:189) also mentions the axe as a symbol of Ningizzida. The carrying of the axe suggests that the Bašmu figurines may have been placed as representatives of Ningizzida. Secondly they are placed as door keepers. This can be compared with Ningizzida's role as a guardian of the door to Anu's palace or as guardian to the entrance of the eastern gate of heaven. This too suggests they represent Ningizzida.

A further example of the protective roles of the *mušhuššu* and Bašmu serpents comes from the discovery of figurines found in a building at Ur. Due to the degradation of the building it was difficult to ascertain the exact position of each figurine in relation to doorways and thresholds. At least four Bašmu figurines and an unspecified number of *mušhuššu* figurines were found in the ruins (Wiggerman 1992:100-101).

Wiggerman (1992:132,139) provides another example of Bašmu figurines used in a protective capacity from a Neo-Assyrian ritual for a building.¹⁶⁹ The text instructs the exorcist to make two Bašmu viper figures from Juniper wood and bury them at the outer gate of the building.

It is clear from these examples that the *mušhuššu* and Bašmu serve to protect places. Their appearances with deities such as Ningizzida, Ninazu, Tišpak, Marduk and Nabu are as their representatives rather than their protectors.

6.2.3 Pazuzu

¹⁶⁹ The text is known as BM64517.

The primary function of the demon Pazuzu was one of protection, according to Black & Green (2008:147-148). Whilst he was used in exorcism to rid the sufferer of illness demons, he was used more as a prophylactic figure in preventing demons from delivering disease and suffering in the first place. One of his most important prophylactic roles was to frighten off the demon Lamaštu especially with regards to pregnant women who often wore Pazuzu amulets. According to Black & Green (2008:147) he provided protection from the pestilence-carrying west winds. Pazuzu amulets in the form of plaques were hung in homes to prevent the entrance of evil spirits. Pazuzu was therefore a protector of person and of place.

6.2.4 Tišpak

Tišpak occasionally played a role as a protective deity. Wiggerman (1992:117) comments on fragments of a text from the *Utukku lemnūti* series in which Tišpak is one of the deities of whom figurines are made. The Tišpak figurine is placed in a doorway to protect the entrance from the return of evil spirits which have been expelled.

6.2.5 Ištar

A Babylonian incantation to rid a house of sickness requires a figurine of Ištar to be made and placed at a window of the house. This seems to suggest, according to the *Bīt mēseri* incantations, that the figurine will provide protection to the inhabitants of the house (Wiggerman 1992:110). An additional incantation seems to reinforce the idea of Ištar in a protective capacity. Again, in the *Utukki limnuti* series, a figurine of the goddess was made and placed in a specified position in the house (Wiggerman 1992:117). The placing of the figurines in the house seems to suggest that Ištar is counted upon to protect the building from further bad spirits from entering and banishment of existing ones. The primary use of the Ištar figurines is therefore protection of place. Protection of person is by extension.

6.2.6 Ištaran

Ištaran was a Sumerian god who was popular from the ED III period into the Middle Babylonian period according to Black & Green (2008:111). He was a Transtigradian deity as his main centre of worship, Der¹⁷⁰, was east of the Tigris in Elamite territory. He also had a shrine at Ningirsu's temple in Lagaš.

6.2.6.1 *Portrayal of Ištaran*

Ištaran had a human upper body (Wiggerman 1997:44), and his lower body was that of a serpent. It coils below him and he appears to use this lower serpent portion of his body to sit upon. This serpent part sometimes ended in a dragon head. Originally Ištaran was portrayed in serpent form and later in human form. The serpent aspect was taken over by his vizier Nirah (Wiggerman 1992:151).

6.2.6.2 *Facets of Ištaran*

Wiggerman (1997:44) mentions that the consort of Ištaran was a rainbow goddess named Manzât. Black & Green (2008:111) give Šarrat-Dēri as his spouse. His sister was Ištar. These goddesses are all connected to the sky and suggest that Ištaran may originally have been a sky god. There are two other facets of Ištaran's personality that are interesting: firstly he was believed to function in the capacity of a judge. This may be why Nirah represented him on *kudurrus*. Secondly, Black & Green (2008:111) expand upon Ištaran's judicial role saying that he was called upon to resolve border disputes between the cities of Umma and Lagaš. Considering the location of Der between the two cities this role makes sense. King Gudea perceived him to be a judicial deity. Ištaran is also a deity of the Underworld as he is involved in a ritual similar to that of Dumuzi and he descends into the Underworld as summer nears its end (Wiggerman 1997:42).

It is in his judicial capacity that Ištaran has a protective function. His appearance on *kudurrus* by himself or his representative indicates his protection of agreements regarding land, treaties or other issues. They therefore protect the rights of the individuals involved in the agreement.

¹⁷⁰ Der lies on the border between Mesopotamia and Elam.

6.2.6.3 *Ištaran and suffering*

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what sickness Ištaran was responsible for. The sufferer, according to Scurlock & Andersen (2005:572), was described as continually sucking on his fingers and placing his hands on his abdomen. Apparently the sufferer cannot drink fluids and eventually dies. Death could be due to fever, jaundice and confusion (Scurlock & Andersen 2005:572).

6.2.7 **Nirah**

Nirah was a serpent deity who was worshipped at Der (Black & Green 2008:166). This serpent vizier, aside from being the messenger of Ištaran, was possibly also his son. It may well be that the serpent that appears on boundary stones is Nirah as some were inscribed with a reference to him as the messenger of Ištaran (Wiggerman 1997:43). Nirah was linked to the hornless snake (Wiggerman 1992:168) and could be distinguished from *mušhuššu* and *Bašmu* by its lack of horns.

The worship of Nirah continued into the Middle-Babylonian period. He was worshipped in the temple of Enlil at Nippur. Nirah was considered to be the protective deity of this temple according to Black & Green (2008:167) and was also considered to be a general protective influence by the people.

6.2.7.1 *Nirah and Irhan*

Irhan was a Sumerian deity from Ur who merged with Nirah from the end of the Ur III period. (Black & Green 2008:167). Indeed Wiggerman (1997:41) also links Nirah and Irhan with each other. Nirah and Irhan may not only have been the messengers of Ištaran but also viewed as his son (Wiggerman 1997:41). Black & Green (2008:167) mention that it is possible that Irhan represented the Euphrates River. One can envisage the Euphrates winding snake-like across the landscape.

6.2.8 **Irnina**

Irnina, according to Wiggerman (1997:42), was a snake goddess in the court of Ningizzida. She was a goddess of death and she appeared in serpent form. However, to the Akkadians she was a goddess of victory and she was also a guardian of heaven

and earth. As a guardian she performs a protective function. Some scholars have considered her to be a manifestation of Ištar (Wiggerman 1997:42). If this is the case it strengthens the serpent associations of Ištar.

6.2.9 Sirsir

Sirsir was the Mesopotamian god of boatmen who Mundkur (1983:66) mentions as possibly being ophidian. Wiggerman (1997:46) describes Sirsir as a snake with a human torso and the head of a dragon at the rear end. Sometimes the torso is substituted for a snake's head.

Wiggerman (1997:46) explains that Sirsir functions as a boat used to convey a seated god through a 'cosmic ocean'. In my opinion Sirsir functions as a protective vessel in this manner. This would be supported by Mundkur's (1983:66) comment that the Mesopotamians conducted shipping activities in the Persian Gulf in which venomous sea snakes existed. The boat god therefore protects those that are contained within the vessel. An example of a sea snake that inhabits the Persian Gulf is the Yellow Sea snake (*Hydrophis spiralis*). This snake, according to O'Shea (2005:148), is the longest sea snake globally and can grow up to 2.74 meters, and is highly venomous, causing deaths. As Mundkur (1983:66) points out this could have posed a threat to boat men and pearl divers alike.

6.2.10 Kišar

Kišar was one of the first Sumerian deities, being produced by Lahmu and Lahamu who emerged from the union between Tiamat and Apsu (Leick 1998:104). We learn from Wakeman (1973:21-22) that Kišar was considered to be a protective serpent, forming the boundary between the heavens and earth. Kišar was female, the counterpart of Anšar, according to Wasilewska (2000:54).

6.2.11 Sagan (Šerag)

Sagan was a Sumerian serpent god. He was considered to be the guardian spirit of the temple of Ešarra (Albright 1920:275). This temple was located in the Assyrian capital of Assur.

6.2.12 Comparison between the Mesopotamian serpents of protection

Table 12: Protective Mesopotamian serpents

Key to abbreviations

Meso: Mesopotamia

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	Gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Serpent aspect	Serpent association	Demonised	Uses serpent symbol	Chthonic	Vegetative or agricultural	Protector of place	Protector of person
Ningizzida	Meso	M	X					X	X	X	X	X
<i>Mušhuššu</i>	Meso	M		X					X		X	
<i>Bašmu</i>	Meso	M		X					X		X	
Pazuzu	Meso	M			X		X				X	
Tišpak	Meso	M	X					X	X	X	X	
Ištar	Meso	F				X		X	X	X	X	
Ištaran	Meso	M	X					X	X	X	X	X
Nirah	Meso	M	X								X	X
Irnina	Meso	F	X								X	
Sirsir	Meso	M	X	X								X
Kišar	Meso	F	X								X	
Sagan	Meso	M	X								X	

- It is clear from the Table above, many of the serpent deities and deities with serpent aspects or associations that perform a protective function, are protectors of place. It stands to reason that if a place is protected from negative entities then those people present in the place will also be protected. Therefore the primary protective function is *protection of place*. Protection of people is a natural result of the primary function.
- It is noticed that the majority of the entities (83%) on the Table are in fact serpent deities or serpent hybrids. There are only two exceptions to this, being Pazuzu who has a serpent aspect and Ištar who has a serpent association. When compared to the Table in 4.2.14 it is noted that most healing deities on the healing table have serpent associations or aspects

(58%) and only 29% are serpent deities. One could conclude from this that serpent deities and serpent hybrids have a stronger link to protection and that deities with serpent aspects and associations have a stronger link to healing.

- Those with chthonic links are all protectors of place.
- Only Ningizzida, Ištar, the *mušhuššu* and *Bašmu*, Tišpak and Pazuzu appear on both the healing and protection Tables.

6.3 PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Rundle Clarke (1959:241) explains that the protective serpent as a symbol in ancient Egypt usually occurs on its own or as part of a pair. A pair enables the serpents to face both directions (front and back) of that which they protect. Furthermore Rundle Clarke (1959:242) tells us that a single protective serpent may have two heads in order to guard both directions at the same time. In addition Rundle Clarke (1959:167) comments that a guardian serpent must have a “frightening aspect”.

The use of the serpent as a symbol of protection in ancient Egypt was much more prevalent than its use in healing and well-being. In my opinion the Egyptians clearly harnessed the qualities of the venomous snakes they feared and used these qualities to protect themselves and their environment in the form of apotropaic magic. So important was the serpent as a protective symbol, says Mundkur (1983:102) that early temples and settlements had their own protective serpents.

In Mesopotamia many of the same serpents that were used as symbols of healing, appear as symbols of protection as well. This is also true in ancient Egypt but the number of protective serpents far outweighs those associated with healing. In Mesopotamia we see the opposite phenomenon.

6.3.1 Sito

Sito, according to Rundle Clarke (1959:239), was a serpent god who encircled the world. In this form he can be considered as a protective deity who protects the world

or creation from the chaotic universe that surrounds creation and order. Sito was an important deity that protected people from cosmic disorder, explains Rundle Clarke (1959:240). Mundkur (1983:80) informs us that Sito was known from pre-dynastic times.

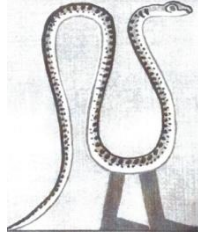


Figure 47: Sito as a serpent on two legs¹⁷¹

Sito is often depicted as a snake that walks around on two legs, or as a many-coiled serpent. Sito is also revealed as a serpent holding his tail in his mouth (Rundle Clarke 1959:240). This latter symbolic representation is known as the *ouroboros*.

6.3.1.1 *Sito as the ouroboros*

The *ouroboros*, according to Pinch (2006:119), represents totality. Sito surrounds and protects creation - therefore he is eternal (Rundle Clarke 1959:141). This would be a necessary aspect of his character as he needs to be a guardian in perpetuity. This could explain why the *ouroboros* came to symbolise eternity. The ancient Egyptians had a concept of the cosmos being surrounded by a serpent with its tail in its mouth – the *ouroboros*. In the second shrine of Tutankhamun was the depiction of a human figure with a serpent encircling its head and shoulders, and another serpent encircling the lower legs and feet (Rundle Clarke 1959:81). This seems to suggest that both sky and earth (above and below) are protected by the primordial serpent.



Figure 48: The protective *ouroboros*¹⁷²

In the image above the serpent holds its tail in its mouth and forms a protective circle around the sun disc. The image comes from a vignette from the First Hour of the Night from *The Book of the Dead*.

¹⁷¹ Rundle Clarke (1959:192). The picture is from the *Papyrus of Ani* in the British Museum.

¹⁷² Budge (1969:179).

6.3.1.2 *Sito as the primordial serpent*

Nun, the primordial waters, represent infinity. Nun has no determination in terms of shape or size. Rundle Clarke (1959:36) explains that Nun represents (or is) the source of the first light, life, land and consciousness. Life is symbolised by a rearing serpent, like a germinating plant reaching for the light. This primeval serpent is Sito. The name means 'he who has completed his time' (Rundle Clarke 1959:50). Now if Sito is at the beginning and at the end we can immediately imagine the image of the serpent with its tail in its mouth. In Thebes Sito was known as Kematef and in Hermopolis he was called Nehebkhou, the 'provider of attributes'.

6.3.2 **Wadjet (Uadjit, Buto, Edjo)**

Wadjet was a cobra goddess and Rundle Clarke (1959:242) comments that she was the 'ideal female snake' so much so that the cobra came to be the symbol for 'goddess'. Baring & Cashford (1993:246) also mention that the hooding cobra was used as the symbol for the goddess.

The cult of Wadjet originated in the Delta region (Rundle Clarke 1959:242). Her name, according to Watterson (1999:129), means 'she of the papyrus'. It is an apt name considering her origins. The papyrus, says Watterson (1999:129) was the symbol for Lower Egypt and Wadjet came to be the protector of this part of the land. It seems that Wadjet was originally worshipped in cobra form at a settlement named Dep which eventually merged with Pe which was an early base of kings of Lower Egypt. Here a temple was built for Wadjet (Watterson 1999:129). Budge (1972:111) comments that Wadjet was the goddess of Tanis, the 19th nome of Lower Egypt.

Despite her origins as a cobra goddess, Wadjet is often depicted in human form for coronation scenes, wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt (Watterson 1999:129). Otherwise she was shown in her true form – the cobra. From Budge (1967:cxxii) we learn that Wadjet could be depicted in human form holding a sceptre around which was wound a serpent. Here we have an image that is reminiscent of the Mesopotamian caduceus once again. Budge (1969:442) mentions that the sceptre which is held by Wadjet could be a papyrus sceptre. Wadjet could very occasionally be represented as

a winged serpent (Budge 1969:442), or a serpent winding its way around the stalk of a papyrus (Budge 1969:443).

6.3.2.1 *The development of the uraeus*

From the earliest times Wadjet became associated with royalty and the protection thereof. According to legend Horus was born near Dep and Wadjet was believed to have guarded him after his birth. Thereafter she played the role of guardian to every living king (Watterson 1999:129-131). The uraeus cobra became the symbol of kings and divine protection. Watterson (1999:131) explains that Re's sun disc usually had a cobra coiled around it and as Re was a sun god, Wadjet therefore became associated with fire. Certain cobras such as the Red Spitting Cobra are able to project their venom by spitting. It was believed that the cobra protecting Re was able to spit fire at his enemies and so Wadjet was also known as the Eye of Re (Watterson 1999:131). In Plate X in Chapter XVII of the *Book of the Dead* is a reference to Wadjet as the 'lady of flame' (Budge (1967:55). This may be a reference either to the pain of an envenomed snake bite or a reference to the ability of some cobras to project their venom, to spit fire, in other words. Sometimes Wadjet appeared alone as the uraeus cobra and sometimes she was accompanied by Nekhbet. Nekhbet could appear either in vulture or cobra form (Watterson 1999:131).

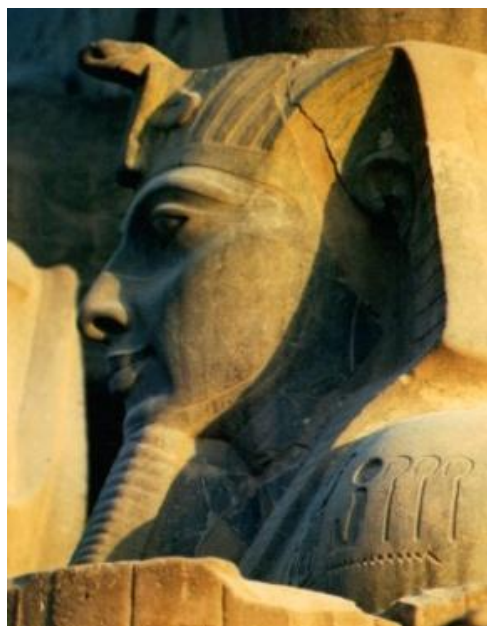


Figure 49: The uraeus cobra on the headdress of the pharaoh¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2002) at Luxor Temple, Egypt.

6.3.3 Isis

The use of the serpent to represent attributes of Isis is illustrated in the picture below.



Figure 50: Isis and Nephthys in serpent form¹⁷⁴

Baring & Cashford (1993:246) explain that the serpent form of Wadjet was often assimilated into Isis. Some examples include her identification with the uraeus in a Middle Kingdom text and her use in the royal headdress (Griffiths 2003:171). Isis also appears alongside her sister Nephthys as a uraeus in the *Book of Gates*. Further examples are shown in the pictures below.



Figure 51:

Column, Temple of Hathor, Denderah¹⁷⁵



Figure 52:

Column, mortuary temple of Ramses II¹⁷⁶

The image of Isis in Chapter Four (4.3.1 Figure 32) with the infant Horus indicates a protective, nurturing role. Watterson (1999:74) expands on the protective role of Isis. The corners of royal sarcophagi were protected by her along with the goddesses Selqet, Nephthys and Neith. Isis was responsible for guarding the deceased's liver. Watterson (1999:74) describes Isis as a protector of the dead. Indeed from Plate VII in Chapter XVII of the *Book of the Dead* we learn of Isis and Nephthys having placed themselves on the head of Horus as protectors in the form of uraeus cobras (Budge 1967:32).

¹⁷⁴ From the New Kingdom 19th Dynasty tomb of Seti I (Baring & Cashford 1993:247).

¹⁷⁵ Serpent goddesses bearing the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. (Photograph: Wendy Golding 2002). Temple of Hathor, Egypt.

¹⁷⁶ Serpent goddesses bearing the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. (Photograph: Wendy Golding (2002). Mortuary temple of Ramesses III, Egypt.

6.3.4 Nephthys, Neith and Selqet

Along with Isis the goddesses Nephthys, Neith and Selqet have three points in common. Firstly they are guardians of the four corners of the royal sarcophagus. Secondly, together they are responsible for protecting the canopic jars that contain the organs of the deceased (Watterson 1999:85). It has already been established that Isis, Selqet, Nephthys and Neith have serpent attributes. This is their third point in common. In effect all four goddesses have serpent connections or attributes and work in conjunction with each other in a protective capacity.

6.3.4.1 Nephthys

Watterson (1999:85) tells us that Nephthys, the sister of Isis watched over the canopic jar containing the lungs of the deceased. As already shown, Nephthys could appear in the form of the uraeus cobra hence displaying the serpent aspect of her nature. Along with Isis she played a role in protecting the dead (Doxey 2003b:275) as well as protecting the infant Horus (Doxey 2003b:276). Isis and Nephthys protect the deceased in the coffin. One of the goddesses is placed at the head of the coffin whilst the other is placed at the foot (Lapp & Niwinski 2003:52). Watterson (1999:112) also mentions Nephthys as a protector of the dead.

6.3.4.2 Neith

Neith was responsible for protecting the canopic jar containing the stomach of the deceased (Watterson 1999:85).

6.3.4.3 Selqet

Selqet was designated to protect one of the canopic jars, specifically the one containing the intestines (Watterson 1999:85).

6.3.5 Renenutet (Ernutet, Renenet) and Shay (Shai)

Renenutet was a cobra goddess (Watterson 1999:80) who was a protector of the harvest and of the granaries. Images of Renenutet were placed at both privately-owned and state granaries during the New Kingdom period (Ritner 2003c:205). In addition, explains Pinch (2006:12) shrines to Renenutet were placed in the fields at

harvest time. McDonald (1989:120) sheds light on a reason for the veneration of Renenutet as a protector of granaries and harvest. Snakes were very good at disposing of rodents who may eat and damage the harvest.

Renenutet is one of the goddesses with whom Isis merged. Watterson (1999:80) explains that this assimilation with other goddesses was designed to make Isis more popular. The assimilation of Renenutet and Isis in the Late Period was known as Isermithis (Watterson 1999:80).

Budge (1969:215 Vol II) shows Renenutet in human form with a serpent head. She is seated and nursing an infant in a typical Isis pose (cf 4.3.1, Figure 33). Johnson (1981:133) adds that in addition to being a goddess of the harvest, Renenutet was a goddess of childbirth and nursing and that both these activities were connected to the serpent. Wilson (2001:173) refers to Renenutet as a 'mother and wet-nurse'. Renenutet can therefore be considered as, not only a protector of the harvest, but of women giving birth and nursing infants.

The consort of Renenutet was Shay (Shai) according to Wilson (2001:173). Shay was a god of fate who was the personification of the life span (Watterson 1999:189). Wilson (2001:172) believes that Shay's origins may go back as far as the pre-dynastic period. He is referred to by Wilson (2001:173) as a protector god and described as a serpent. Renenutet, too was associated with fate and this is indicated by the appearance of the weaving shuttle on the front of her cobra hood (Johnson 1981:133). In this symbolism she is similar to Neith. Wilson (2001:174) suggests that the concept of destiny (as personified by Shay) is closely connected to serpent imagery.

6.3.6 Meretseger

Meretseger was a cobra goddess and the focus of a local New Kingdom cult at Deir el-Medina (Lesko 2003:80). This was the village of the craftsmen who worked on the tombs of the Valley of the Kings. It was believed that Meretseger lived in the mountain peak above this village and that she was its founder (Lesko 2003:80). She was known as a 'lover of silence' (Watterson 1999:208).

The terrain around Deir el-Medina was ideal for snakes such as cobras and naturally the people feared being bitten. A stele carved into the cliff face shows workmen and a vizier worshipping Meretseger (Romer 2003:113). Worship of this goddess seemed to hold prophylactic value. If she was appeased then the workmen would be protected from being bitten by snakes. Johnson (1981:133) refers to Meretseger as a protector of the Theban Necropolis. In such a role she could be considered to be a protector of the tombs and the dead that lay within the Valley of the Kings. Schulz (1998:522) concurs that Meretseger was a protector of the dead and adds that she was the patron deity of those who worked on the Theban tombs.

Meretseger could appear in serpent form with two wings (Mundkur 1983:80). She could also appear in human form with a cobra head as shown on the *Stela of Hay*. This was a limestone stele dating to approximately 1150 BCE (Görg 1998:441).

6.3.7 Nekhbet

The worship of Nekhbet began at a centre called Nekheb which is a very old settlement dating back to around 5000 BCE, says Watterson (1999:132). Here Nekhbet was worshipped in the form of a vulture. In the uraeus Nekhbet often accompanied Wadjet either in her vulture form or that of a cobra. She protected the crown of Upper Egypt (Watterson 1999:131).

Mundkur (1983:102) provides us with some very interesting information regarding the protective capacity of Nekhbet. Together with Wadjet special shrines known as *iterty* were dedicated to the two goddesses. The *iterty*, says Mundkur (1983:102) was used as a depository for sacred objects that belonged to the pharaoh. The *iterty* was a dual shrine and had a pair of stelae on which serpents were carved to represent Nekhbet and Wadjet. The stelae with the serpent carvings served to protect the contents of the shrines.

6.3.8 Netjer-ankh

Netjer-ankh was a cobra deity whose name meant 'living god' (Mundkur 1983:24). Amongst the amulets found in Tutankamun's mummy wrappings were those marked

with the name of this deity (Mundkur 1983:24-25). Koh (1994:85) mentions a gilded wooden cobra found in Tutankhamun's tomb. An inscription refers to the deceased as 'beloved of Netjer-ankh'. In order for amulets of this deity to have been used he must have been considered to provide a protective function.

6.3.9 Kebehut

Kebehut was a serpent goddess. According to Doxey (2003a:22) she was the assistant to Anubis in purifying the dead. Doxey (2003a:22) relays that the Pyramid Texts indicate that Kebehut was the daughter of Anubis. Her role as assistant to Anubis was important as he was the guardian of the dead on their way to the afterlife (Watterson 1999:178).

6.3.10 Nehebkhou

Nehebkhou was a snake-headed deity who represented 'invincible living power'. He appeared in amulet form during the Third Intermediate Period according to Andrews (2003:16). Nehebkhou was invoked to protect dwellings from snakes that may enter, says Mundkur (1983:64). Despite the protective role of Nehebkhou, Mundkur (1983:64) believes that the origins of this deity were sinister. Furthermore he mentions that Nehebkhou was sometimes paired with Selqet in certain texts. Nehebkhou also dwelled in the underworld (cf 6.3.12.13 below).

Nehebkhou is not to be confused with a serpent-headed goddess named Neheb-ka with whom the deceased identified himself (Budge 1967:cxxi).

6.3.11 Weret-Hekau

Weret-Hekau was the goddess of magic. Her name means 'great of magic' according to Pinch (2006:11) and she was usually shown in cobra form. Furthermore Pinch (2006:11) relays that Weret-Hekau was believed to be the power in the Egyptian crown and also acted as a foster-mother to the Egyptian pharaohs. Serpent-shaped staffs are thought to represent her.

6.3.12 Guardians of the underworld

As much as the Egyptian underworld was a place of evil serpents intent on destroying the sun god Re, it was also a place where serpents symbolised protective spirits of the underworld realm. In the Egyptian underworld, in my opinion, we see a prime example of the capacity of the people to place the serpent in two completely opposite roles – that of chaotic serpent and that of protective serpent. The best example of two opposite roles in one deity is provided by Seth.

6.3.12.1 Seth

Seth is most well-known for killing Osiris and opposing Horus (Te Velde 2003:331-332). However, there was a time when Seth was not perceived as evil. He was responsible for guarding the sun god Re on his nightly journey through the underworld. Te Velde (2003:333) notes that Seth appears in the Coffin Texts as the one who kept Apophis at bay in order to protect Re. Rundle Clarke (1959:209) mentions the New Kingdom mythology found in the *Contendings of Seth and Horus* in which Seth's life is spared provided that he takes his place at the bow of Re's boat in order to ward off Apophis. It is very aptly put by Baring & Cashford (1993:259) that Seth destroys an aspect of himself when he spears Apophis. It is pointed out by Thompson (1970:135) that Seth defeating Apophis is rather reminiscent of the Mesopotamian Marduk defeating Tiamat. He mentions that the Tiamat myth may well have entered Egypt around 2500 BCE and could indeed have been influential in this regard.

6.3.12.2 Mehen and Nehaher

Mehen was a serpent god against whom the deceased were believed to have played draughts according to Budge (1972:42). Rundle Clarke (1959:167) tells us that he was an underworld serpent that encircled Osiris. He was also known as Nehaher or 'fearful face' or even Wer who was very ancient according to Rundle Clarke (1959:167). Nehaher says 'I will protect your soul and your shadow' (Rundle Clarke 1959:169). As long as Osiris is in his role of god of the dead he is protected by the serpent but as soon as the god begins to revive, Mehen/Nehaher opposes him. According to myth once Osiris manages to escape from Nehaher he is enthroned upon an ancient mound

that rises from the primeval waters of Nun. This mound is also protected by a serpent (Rundle Clarke 1959:171).



Figure 53: Osiris on the mound of Nun¹⁷⁷

In the image above the serpent that protects the mound can be clearly seen. There are a few interesting symbolic representations in this picture. On the left of the mound is a vulture which probably represents Nekhbet and on the right is a cobra which is most likely Wadjet. Nekhbet as we know can be represented in serpent form. The other interesting figure is the one on the far left holding the crossed serpents. Rundle Clarke (1959:171-172) refers to this figure as a ‘peculiar being carrying two stiff serpents’ and thinks that it may represent the ‘divine word’. However, it is remarkably similar to a figure presented by Pinch (2006:11). She believes this figure to be the goddess of magic, Weret-Hekau.

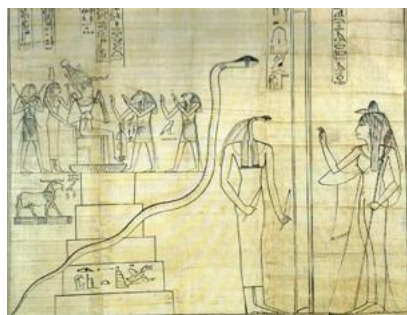


Figure 54: Underworld serpents¹⁷⁸

The image above is from a funerary papyrus of Nesitanebetisheru who was a priestess. It dates to approximately 950 BCE (Pinch 2006:11). At the top left hand corner is the figure very much like the one commented on by Rundle Clarke (1959:171) which Pinch believes is Weret-Hekau. The serpent-headed figure opposite the priestess may be Nehebkhau as he guards the entrance to the underworld (cf 6.3.12.3 below). The scene seems to suggest that he is meeting the priestess at the entrance to the underworld. Behind him is an unidentified serpent which may be the protector of the mound upon which Osiris is seated, or it may be Mehen/Nehaher.

¹⁷⁷ Rundle Clarke (1959:171).

¹⁷⁸ Pinch (2006:11).

6.3.12.3 Nehebkhou

Nehebkhou was a guardian to the entrance of the underworld and protected Re on his nightly journey through this realm (also discussed in 6.3.10). He has been depicted as a two-headed serpent whose tail culminates in a head. Nehebkhou provided protection for the ‘seven forms of Osiris’ as explained by Rundle Clarke (1959:167) according to an image on the tomb wall of Ramses V.

6.3.13 Comparison between the Egyptian serpents of protection

Table 13: The Egyptian serpents of protection

Key to abbreviations

Egy: Egypt

M: male

F: female

Name	Region	Gender	Deified serpent	Serpent or hybrid	Serpent aspect	Serpent association	Demonised	Uses serpent symbol	Chthonic	Vegetative or agricultural	Protector of place	Protector of person
Sito	Egy	M	X								X	
Wadjet	Egy	F	X					X			X	X
Isis	Egy	F			X							X
Nephtys	Egy	F			X							X
Neith	Egy	F	X									X
Selqet	Egy	F			X							X
Renenutet	Egy	F	X							X	X	X
Shay	Egy	M	X									X
Meretseger	Egy	F	X								X	X
Nekhbet	Egy	F			X			X			X	X
Netjer-ankh	Egy	M	X									X
Kebehut	Egy	F	X									X
Nehebkau	Egy	M	X						X		X	X
Kematef	Egy	M	X								X	
Weret Hekau	Egy	F	X									X
Seth	Egy	M			X			X				X
Mehen	Egy	M	X						X			X
Nehaher	Egy	M	X						X			X

- There appears to be an even mix of male and female deities on the list above that perform a protective function.

- The deified serpent goddesses are all specifically cobras rather than any other species of snake. The cobra is very strongly linked to the goddess in ancient Egypt.
- The snake species linked to the male deities are not specified with the exception of Netjer-anh who is a cobra.
- The serpent symbol used by Nekhbet and Wadjet is a long staff with a serpent wrapped around it which is reminiscent of the caduceus.
- The goddesses with serpent aspects, namely Isis, Nephthys and Nekhbet, can appear in cobra form but it is not their primary aspect. The cobra is merely an aspect of their make-up.
- Although sometimes present in the underworld the goddesses such as Isis, Nekhbet, Wadjet, Nephthys and Selqet are not chthonic.

6.4 PROTECTIVE SERPENTS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE

The serpent does not appear to be used in a protective capacity in the region of Syria-Palestine. It is not impossible that it filled a protective role but the evidence is lacking. There is one exception and that is the *seraphim*. These are beings that one automatically assumes to be angels but there is some evidence that they were perceived of as serpent beings.

6.4.1 The *seraphim*

Although Isaiah and the *seraphim* in his inaugural vision date to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the influences appear to come from the Bronze Age and the early part of the Iron Age (Randolph Joines 1938:98-99).

As Koh (1994:20) mentions, in the Middle Bronze Age Egypt was dominated by Hyksos who were of Canaanite origin. During the Late Bronze Age Canaan was dominated by Egypt. So cultural influences would have diffused between the two regions during these time periods. Koh (1994:20) therefore believes that Egyptian serpent ideology could have possibly influenced the Canaanite snake cults. This could well have a bearing on the Egyptian influence on the *seraphim*.

6.4.1.1 *The Hebrew use of the word 'saraph'.*

Numbers 21:6 reads 'then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people'. In Hebrew the word is שרפים which is transliterated as '*seraphim*'. This is the plural for שרף or '*saraph*'. According to the biblical narrative when Moses made the Nehuštān he was commanded to make a 'fiery serpent' (Numbers 21:8). In other words he made a שרף (*saraph*). Wilson (2001:75) gives a further example from Deuteronomy (8:15) which is a reference to the Israelite god leading his people out of the wilderness which is described as a place of 'fiery serpents' and scorpions. In Hebrew the reference is to נחש שרף (*nahash saraph*), in other words 'fiery serpents'.

According to Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:976) שרף is listed as a verb meaning 'to burn'. As a noun it refers to a venomous serpent. It is mentioned that this serpent may derive its name from the burning sensation felt by an envenomed bite. Mettinger (1999:743) also lists the verb as meaning 'to burn, incinerate or destroy'. Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:977) refers to the *seraphim* as serpent-bodied beings or deities. Randolph Joines (1967:411) points us in the direction of Enoch 20:7 where serpents and *cherubim* are mentioned, rather than *seraphim* and *cherubim*. So it would appear that the word *seraph* originally has reference to a serpent.

6.4.1.2 *The flying serpent*

Another aspect is added to the *seraph* in Isaiah 14:29 where it is described as a 'flying *seraph*'. Now we have a winged serpent. In Isaiah 6:2 we have a description of the *seraphim* as beings with six wings – clearly a composite creature.¹⁷⁹ They stand above the throne of Yahweh in a protective capacity. In Isaiah 30:6 the Negeb is described as a place of vipers and flying serpents. Mettinger (1999:742) describes the *seraphim* as winged serpents with human characteristics.

The protective role of the winged serpent is mentioned by Herodotus says Randolph Joines (1938:8). Herodotus was rather imaginative and he mentions frankincense trees of Arabia guarded by winged serpents. The winged serpent does appear to be linked to the desert, which is pointed out by Randolph Joines (1938:8).

¹⁷⁹ See Randolph Joines (1938:42-43) for various scholars' opinions as to the visual identity of the *seraphim* in Isaiah.

6.4.1.3 *Seref and šarrāpu*

Cook (1930:54) mentions two possible sources of influence for the *seraphim*. The first possibility is that they were influenced by the *seref*, an Egyptian winged griffin. Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:977) also mentions that in Egypt there were guardian griffins known as *seref*. The second possibility is that they were influenced by the Akkadian *šarrāpu*. This latter name equates with ‘the burner’ which according to Cook (1930:54) was a western epithet of Nergal. Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:977) concurs with this.

According to Rütterswörden (2004:223), it is Keel’s opinion that the *seref* was a uraeus cobra and that the name derived from the burning of the venom. Another idea presented is that the name derived from the Egyptian *srf*, meaning ‘warmth, heat or fever’ Rütterswörden (2004:224).

6.4.1.4 *The Egyptian influence on the seraphim*

During the Late Bronze Age II and Iron Age I Koh (1994:115) believes that snake iconography of the southern Levant was influenced by Egyptian iconography. He also mentions that Egyptian ideology would have accompanied this iconographical influence. So the Egyptian goddess of protection, Wadjet, may well have influenced the *seraphim*.

Randolph Joines (1938:44) discusses that the Egyptians made references to fiery serpents particularly in the tomb of Ramses VI. These serpents have epithets such as ‘fiery one’, ‘burned one’ and ‘she whose flame is painful’. She also mentions that cobras which breathe fire are plentiful in Egyptian iconography. These iconographical serpents were often used in a protective capacity because the flames which emanated from their mouths were used to destroy the enemy. It is added by Randolph Joines (1967:412) that one of the functions of the uraeus was the protection of the king and sacred objects by the breathing out of fire, hence a fiery serpent.

The rearing serpent, or uraeus, became a symbol for Egyptian royalty. It appears that the uraeus symbol migrated to Syria-Palestine when the Egyptians exercised control in that region. The uraeus iconography was known in Syria-Palestine from the Hyksos to the Iron Age periods and was a possible origin for the *seraphim* (Mettinger

(1999:743). Randolph Joines (1938:48) says that sometimes the uraeus was given wings. This may have been intended to suggest the swiftness of the creature. Furthermore wings were found on the serpents that guarded both Upper and Lower Egypt.¹⁸⁰ She adds that the winged serpent could be seen as a guardian to the underworld. An example from the underworld is found in the tomb of Rameses VI. A winged serpent figure is found on his tomb wall and according to the inscription it is called ‘the leader’ (Randolph Joines 1967:412-413). Importantly some of these winged serpent beings had human attributes like hands, feet and faces (Randolph Joines 1938:48). In Isaiah 6:2 the *seraphim* clearly have these anthropomorphic attributes. Budge (1969:442) mentions that Wadjet was occasionally depicted as a winged serpent.

Randolph Joines (1967:413) discusses the Egyptian winged serpent in relation to the royal throne. The archaeological evidence comes in the form of Tutankhamun’s throne. Each arm of the throne is formed in the following manner: a four-winged uraeus at the back of the throne thrusts two wings forward which become the arm rests. This can be seen in the photograph below. In addition there are various uraei positioned around the throne for protection. Randolph Joines (1967:413) believes that this type of royal iconography was known to the Israelites and filtered into Israelite royal symbolism.



Figure 55: Tutankhamun’s gilded throne¹⁸¹



Figure 56: Winged uraeus amulet with human features¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ For more examples of the winged uraeus refer to Randolph Joines (1938:48 and 1967:412).

¹⁸¹ Desroches-Noblecourt (1967:42).

¹⁸² Amulet from the mummy of Tutankhamun (Desroches-Noblecourt 1967:230).

Depictions of winged serpents were portrayed in the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts. Below is an illustration from the *Book of Pylons* (left) and from the *Book of that which is in the underworld* (right).



Figure 57: Winged uraeus¹⁸³

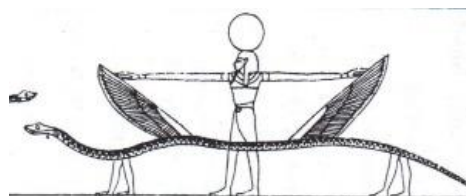


Figure 58: Winged serpent¹⁸⁴

The emblem of the winged sun disc with dual uraei was adopted from Egypt by the Hittites, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Assyrians and the Persians (Randolph Joines 1938:49). It is therefore highly likely that this iconography, which found its way to Syria-Palestine, was used the by Israelites and provided an influence in Isaiah's inaugural vision. Indeed there is a variety of Egyptian and Egyptian-influenced artefacts in Syria-Palestine. Randolph Joines (1938:49) mentions numerous scarabs, for example, many of which bore the winged uraeus. Examples have been found at Megiddo, Lachish, Gaza and Beth-Shemesh. The inscriptions on some of these scarabs indicate that they belonged to people of the Palestinian region in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. So the iconography was not unusual by the time of Isaiah.

It is important to note that the *seraphim* in Isaiah's vision provided not only protection but also healing. This is evident from the line uttered by one of the *seraphim*: 'turn and be healed' (Isaiah 6:10).

A winged serpent is mentioned in utterance 703 of the Egyptian Pyramid Texts: 'You have no human father and you have no human mother, for this mother of yours is the great hwrt-serpent, white of head cloth, who dwells in Nekheb, whose wings are open' (Faulkner 1969:307). In my opinion the reference to 'mother' and open wings suggest a protective figure. This, and the iconographical examples above illustrate

¹⁸³ Budge (1969:197).

¹⁸⁴ Budge (1969:251).

that winged serpent were part of Egyptian thought and a possible basis for influence in Syria-Palestine.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can be drawn from the Tables in this Chapter:

Deities seem to either protect a person (or other deity) or place. 91.67% of the Mesopotamian deities on the list are protectors of place. Some of these are protectors of person as well. Only Sirsir was purely a protector of person. Quite the opposite phenomenon occurs on the Table of Egyptian deities. 88.24% of the deities are protectors of person. Only Sito and Kematef are protectors of place alone. Of the deities that are protectors of person a few are protectors of place as well.

Immediately from the point above it is clear that a big difference in the perception of the protective role of the serpent between Mesopotamia and Egypt can be seen. The protective serpent in Mesopotamia was primarily linked to protecting places whilst protecting the individual was secondary. The perception of the protective role of the serpent in Egypt was completely the opposite. The primary protective function was to protect the individual or the king. Protection of place was secondary.

Serpents do not appear to be used to represent protection in Syria-Palestine. The exception is the *seraphim* that protect Yahweh as king in the Iron Age Syro-Palestinian region. Even this symbolism however appears heavily influenced by earlier Egyptian iconography.

In both Mesopotamia and Egypt the overwhelming majority of entities from the tables in this Chapter are deified serpents. This amounts to 70% of a combined Egyptian and Mesopotamian list. In Mesopotamia the balance are either serpent hybrids or a deity with a serpent aspect or association. In Egypt no serpent hybrids or deities with serpent associations are connected to protection. The remainder of protective deities in Egypt are therefore those with a serpent aspect. It is clear from this point that the serpent is very closely linked to protection in both Mesopotamia and Egypt. The majority of protective serpents are either a serpent deity or deity with serpent aspects.

Mesopotamian serpent deities and hybrids are more closely linked to protection. Mesopotamian deities with serpent aspects or associations are more closely linked to healing.

Only three Egyptian deities (Isis, Neith and Selqet) appear on the table of healing deities and they all appear as protective deities as well. In comparison 50% of the Mesopotamian protective deities are also healing deities.

At least half of the Mesopotamian protective entities are chthonic. Only 16.67% of the Egyptian entities in comparison are chthonic.

Of all the Egyptian deities on the Table only Renenutet has a vegetation/agricultural association. Only 33.33% of the Mesopotamian entities have a vegetation/agricultural link.

The majority of protective serpent entities in Mesopotamia are male (75%) whilst only 44.44% on the Egyptian table are male. This can most likely be explained by protective Egyptian serpents being identified with the cobra which was very much a goddess symbol.

CHAPTER SEVEN

UTILISATION OF THE SERPENT IN PROTECTION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Apotropaic magic was most probably used as a prophylactic measure to attempt to prevent snake bites, to prevent attack by enemy, to prevent entry of a snake into a building and to protect a building. This Chapter investigates how the serpent was used prophylactically and how prophylactic measures were used against the serpent.

Amulets and the use of apotropaic magic regarding the serpent and protection can be divided into two distinct categories.

- Apotropaic magic in the form of amulet pieces, offerings, invocations and incantations was used to protect the individual or a place (dwelling, temple or other building) from snakes. This can incorporate the use of sympathetic magic where the image or invocation of the serpent was used as a repellent.
- Apotropaic magic which incorporated the use of serpent imagery to protect the individual or place from non-serpentine negative entities.

7.2 PROTECTION AGAINST THE SERPENT

People in the ancient world used various measures which they believed would protect them from snakes, living or supernatural. With regards to protection from living snakes, people took steps to attempt to prevent snake bites and entry into buildings. These measures were largely based on the use of magic. The ancient Egyptians in particular believed that live snakes could harm the dead and also believed that snakes in the supernatural realm, such as Apophis and his serpentine hoard, would prevent the passage of the deceased to the afterlife.

Homopoeic amulets are those in the form of a living animal. By wearing such an amulet the wearer would presumably take on some of the desired qualities of that creature (Andrews 1994:12). It was believed their power would help to ward off or

protect against the creature whose likeness they wore in animal form (Andrews 1994:60). Many amulets took on serpent form.

Petrie (1972:25) discusses serpent amulets saying that they were used to protect against snakes by employing sympathetic magic. The serpents in the Egyptian amulet group studied by Petrie were not uraeus cobras. The body form could be represented as straight, coiled, spiral or wavy (Petrie 1972:25). This category of serpent amulet has examples ranging from the prehistoric era to approximately the XVIIth Dynasty. The examples given by Petrie are made of the following materials: wood, red glass, limestone, flint, lapis lazuli and pottery.

Protection could come in the form of the written or spoken word, or images or amulet objects. As an example, the ancient Egyptians believed that both the written and spoken word held powers. Some hieroglyphs such as the adder could be inscribed incomplete or with a dagger through it. This was to prevent the creature from escaping and thereby neutralising the potential harm that it may cause (Ghalioungui 1973:8).

7.2.1 Incantations

7.2.1.1 Ugaritic serpent charm RS 24.244

RS 24.244 is an Ugaritic tablet with a prophylactic text, an incantation for a snake charmer. The intent of the incantation is to protect the charmer from being bitten (Astour 1968:13). Part of the incantation reads:

With El of the confluence of two rivers in the gathering of the Two Oceans is the incantation for the bite of the serpent, for the sting of the serpent, the scaly. From him, the conjurer shall destroy, from him he shall extirpate the venom. There he shall bind the serpent, shall feed the (serpent), the scaly, shall set up a chair and sit down (Astour 1968:16).

This incantation tells how the mare goddess, *Phlt*, appeals to various deities for assistance in removing venomous snakes. *Phlt* seems to have been the patron goddess of the charmer. It was believed that the snake charmer could use incantations to make a venomous snake harmless. The charmer removes the venom. Astour (1968:18) maintains that ‘binding’ the snake refers to hypnotising or ‘bewitching’ it.

7.2.1.2 Further Ugaritic incantations

Spronk (1999:278-279) mentions an incantation text known as KTU 1.82 (or RS 15.134) in which deities are invoked to destroy various evil forces. Included in these evil forces are Rešeph, god of disease, as well as serpents. Another Ugaritic incantation known as RS 92.2014 seems designed to protect the owner of the archive in which the tablet was kept, from snakebite. The negative entity is described as a 'foaming snake' and a scorpion. The incantation accompanies a rite in order to exorcise the demon (Spronk 1999:281). KTU 1.100 is mentioned as a protective amulet for medical practitioners in the *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies* (Wyatt 1999:575).

7.2.1.3 Mesopotamian incantations

Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:1) maintain that early incantations are defined as those that existed, probably in oral tradition, before magical texts appeared in written form. Canonized texts date to the late 2nd millennium BCE and most likely reflect portions of the oral traditions. Geller (2010a:91) describes incantations as 'dramatic affairs intended to impress the patient'. It seems they were accompanied by often flamboyant rituals. According to Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:1) the written magic traditions are most likely abbreviated versions of the oral traditions known by magicians. Many incantations involve a dialogue between the god Ea (Enki) and his son Marduk, and Geller (2010a:27) comments that the dialogue has become an integral part of Mesopotamian magic.

It is thought that the early texts arising from the early Mesopotamian incantations may have come from the kingdom of Larsa (Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey 1985:2), specifically from a city called Enegi where a temple to the serpent deity Ninazu existed. Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:2) inform us that out of some 69 incantations 34 of them had references to animals such as serpents. The texts, in Sumerian and Akkadian, date mainly to the Ur III period with a few from the Old Babylonian era.

There are various types of incantations generally defined by their opening lines or rubrics. Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:5) mention an 'incantation formula concerning a serpent'. It may be an incantation to protect against the serpent as the

same incantation contains words ‘against the worm’ and ‘against the scorpion’. It is ambiguous though as van Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:6) point out that the word ‘concerning’ is sometimes translatable as ‘in praise of’.

7.2.1.4 Mesopotamian incantation to repel Lamaštu

From a text labelled YBC 4601 (Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey 1985:26) comes an early Akkadian incantation to protect pregnant women and babies from the demon Lamaštu who uses serpents as a symbol. This demon is linked to serpent imagery in terms of her movement. The incantation tells how twin deities repel Lamaštu by making her exit the building. Lines 18 to 23 of the incantation deal with ‘binding’ a serpent. This is similar to the reference of binding a serpent in the Ugaritic serpent charms (cf 7.2.1.1 above). Line 15 of the incantation reads ‘...bound her with...’. It is possible this line refers to ‘binding’ Lamaštu the way a serpent is bound to render it ineffective. Treating Lamaštu the way a serpent is treated suggests that the attributes of a serpent were indeed associated with her – possibly a lot more strongly than iconography suggests.

7.2.1.5 Further Mesopotamian incantations

A text labelled YBC 8637 concerns *muš-gur-ru-da-k[am]* and may be interpreted as an incantation against a biting serpent according to Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:30). Another text, YBC 5629, contains the word *muš-a-kam* which translates as ‘concerning a snake’ (Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey 1985:30). YBC 5623 makes reference to *muš-[dab-ba]-kam* which Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:30) translate as ‘to catch (or bind) a snake’. In this incantation is a description of fangs of the snake that drip with poison.

7.2.1.6 A Namburbi incantation

The *Namburbi texts* are so called due to the Sumerian NAM.BUR.BI in the title. Generally the text was written on a single clay tablet and it details the ritual actions to be performed along with the incantation. Avalos (1995:342) mentions that *Namburbi texts* often incorporated the use of animal figurines as repellents, including snakes. Although the tablets date to the first millennium BCE, textual evidence suggests that their origin lies within the Babylonian period. Their use continued into the later

Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. The function of the texts was apotropaic and was intended to undo evil (Caplice 1974:7).

In a ‘prayer for the veil of a snake’ the incantation is made to the gods Ea, Šamaš and Asalluhi (Caplice 1974:18). They are praised and exalted and their ability to do away with evil is acknowledged. The petitioner announces his purity. He informs the gods that he has set up chairs for them and presented them with red garments. Furthermore he has made offerings to them, as well as poured libations and wine and beer for them. The petitioner acknowledges his fear and requests that the ‘tongue of evil’ be put aside (Caplice 1974:18). Presumably the ‘tongue of evil’ is a reference to the snake.

7.2.1.7 Possible Israelite charms

Ecclesiastes 10:11 reads ‘...if the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer’. In Kohlenberger (1987:587) the Hebrew reads לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן. According to Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:127) the word בַּעַל translates as ‘owner’ or ‘lord’, so the phrase would translate as ‘owner of the tongue’. Presumably this is conceived of as someone who is gifted in the art of speech. As the passage (Ecclesiastes 10:11) relates to a snake, one could interpret this phrase as referring to a snake charmer.

This indicates that the Israelites were familiar with the practice of snake charming and also that charmers and methods of snake charming were known. One would then assume that the charmers had incantations that they used. The same conclusion can be drawn from Jeremiah 8:17: ‘for behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders which cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you’. Davies (1969:52) says that the word ‘*lakhash*’ derived from *nahash* (snake) and eventually came to mean ‘a charm against any demon’. This implies the possibility that ‘*lakhash*’ may have originally applied to serpent charms before it gained meaning in a broader context. According to Brown, Driver & Briggs (2010:538) the Hebrew verb שָׁחַח means to whisper or to charm. Furthermore they suggest that the word did possibly have its origins in snake charming. As a noun it refers to a whispering or a charming, and can also refer to charms or amulets.

7.2.1.8 *An Egyptian book*

The *Book of sealing the mouths of the enemy* is an ancient Egyptian collection of text that contains spells to ‘seal’ the mouths of dangerous creatures including snakes (Pinch 2006:84).

7.2.2 **Magic spells**

7.2.2.1 *An Egyptian protection of the house*

An Egyptian spell to protect the house is found in the *Papyrus Chester Beatty VIII*, verses 1, 2 and 4. There is mention of Nehebkhou, a protective serpent. This may well be a use of sympathetic magic to protect the dwelling from snakes. The ‘four noble ladies’ referred to are most likely uraeus cobras, perhaps one for each corner of the room. The reference to ‘in whose mouth is their flame’ may well be a reference to venom which is used to combat the enemy.

Mundkur (1983:63) mentions an Egyptian spell which was called *Book for freeing a house from the poison of any snake, male or female*. The reference to protecting a dwelling from ‘male and female’ snakes is mentioned in one of the magic spells from a stele. In the spell garlic is used to protect the dwelling of a person named Wennofer who is deceased (Borghouts 1978:82-83). The garlic is called upon to close the mouths of creatures perceived to be dangerous to the deceased, which include male and female snakes. The house is protected from snakes entering it by mixing ground garlic and beer together, sprinkling the mixture throughout the house during the night and reciting the magic spell in the process (Borghouts 1978:82-83).

7.2.2.2 *Turin Papyrus 54003*

The *Turin Papyrus* dates to the Egyptian First Intermediate Period and contains several anti-snake spells.

One of these anti-snake spells is discussed by Waraska (2009). In the ritual accompanying the incantation, a female figure of *sin* is used, says Waraska (2009:131). She explains that *sin* is a type of clay specifically used for figurines utilised in rituals of apotropaic magic and healing (Waraska 2009:130). Waraska

(2009:131) relays that the *sin* figurine was rubbed by the magico-medical person or the sufferer during the ritual.

Waraska (2009:132) mentions that the anti-snake spells of the *Turin Papyrus* are similar to those found in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts. The spell involving the *sin* figurine, being lines 13 to 16, reads as follows: ‘Repelling your striking power, that which was sent as its furious one. I have poured out your magical books with this clay [figure] of Isis which comes out under the armpit of Selqet. My finger is its protection, the clay its guard’. Note the references to Isis and Selqet who have serpent associations. The spell continues: ‘Where then? (2x) Look, they are here in their proper place. Do not attack a bone, do not split a vessel until you have reached the prosperity of my mouth/spell’. The instructions for ritual action accompanying the spell are: ‘Words spoken over a clay figure which has been encircled, a knife therein it, a measure [of cloth], *dbit*-plant or halfa grass’ (Waraska 2009:134-136).

Borghouts (1978:11) also quotes this spell: ‘Your fury is repelled, you who were sent as a furious attacker! I have scattered your books with this clay of Isis that has come forth from under the armpits of Selqis’. Borghouts (1978:111) explains that the ‘books’ refer to magical books that are apparently used by the snake.

Spells to repel snakes such as this have continued into the New Kingdom, Late and Ptolemaic Periods (Waraska 2009:138). The spell is recited by the magico-medical practitioner who also performs the accompanying rituals, says Waraska (2009:138). She further points out (2009:139) that references to Isis who was considered to play a role as healer, are not uncommon in these types of incantations. This is due to the role she played in the myth wherein Horus was bitten by a snake or stung by a scorpion.

Waraska (2009:140) suggests that as the figurine is removed from under the armpit of Selqet¹⁸⁵ the snake may be repelled by the sweat of the goddess. This sweat may be considered divine or magical.

¹⁸⁵ Interestingly Waraska (2009:140) mentions an illustration on the ceiling of the tomb of Senenmut where Selqet is positioned at the top of the constellation and Isis is located in the region of her right armpit.

Another example of a snake repelling spell from the *Turin Papyrus* is given by Borghouts (1978:91). The spell is intended to protect the living individual from a snake bite. It is entitled 'a spell for descending into a thicket'. The snake is commanded to move backwards. The one reciting the spell says to the snake: 'your teeth are broken, your poison scattered'. Hopefully this would render the snake incapable of inflicting a venomous bite.

7.2.2.3 Further examples of Egyptian spells to protect the individual

Two spells for conjuring vipers are given by Borghouts (1978:92). They appear to have been retrieved from a statue in Cairo. In both spells Horus is invoked and the incantations speak of the vipers being slain.

From a statue in Cairo and information from the *Brooklyn Papyrus* comes a spell for 'closing the mouth' of a male or female snake (Borghouts 1978:93). The snake referred to as 'the one in his hole' is aligned with Apophis (Borghouts 1978:112). In this spell the king, Usimare Miamun, is likened to a lion. He is also called Ramesses Hequiunu and a son of Re, the sun god. As a lion and sun god the king is immune from the bite of a snake. The spell is recited over a faience lion with red linen thread. This amulet is then bound to the individual's hand and intended to give protection in the bedroom (Borghouts 1978:93) which is presumably tantamount to protection while the individual is sleeping.

An incantation for protection from the Metternich stele (Borghouts 1978:124) speaks directly to the snake as a creature that lurks in the road and at the opening of holes (Borghouts 1978:94). The individual is aligned with deities such as Selqet, Re, Thoth, Neferten, Sepa and Mneris and as such the snake is told that the individual cannot be bitten.

7.2.3 Egyptian mortuary texts, spells and vignettes

7.2.3.1 Snakes as a threat to the deceased

The ancient Egyptians believed that snakes posed a threat to the deceased. Accordingly texts were inscribed within tombs to provide protection. Mundkur (1983:62) mentions examples found within the tombs of pharaohs such as Unas, Seti I

and Teti. These inscriptions were intended to repel snakes from entering the tomb chamber with words such as ‘...back with thee, Hidden snake’.

Certain mortuary texts and spells in ancient Egypt were designed for protection against the serpent in two manners. Firstly there were those designed for protection on a macro level, and secondly, those intended for protection on a micro level. Protection on a macro level involves protection of the ordered universe against the serpent of chaos, namely Apophis. These texts provide protection by the telling of the destruction of the serpent of chaos. They are found in tombs in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts which were inscribed upon the burial chamber walls or upon the coffin of the deceased. These spells also functioned on a micro level as they were intended to protect the deceased from serpents (Wakeman 1973:15). As Wakeman (1973:15) explains, the soul of the deceased was identified with Re. The protection of Re by destroying Apophis transfers by analogy to the soul of the deceased.

So according to the above there were clearly two main areas of concern with regards to snakes – real or imaginary. In addition it was believed that live snakes could enter the tombs and devour the deceased. It was believed that the serpents of the underworld lived on the bodies of the deceased and consumed their blood (Budge 1969:23). This belief may have stemmed from the fact that venomous snakes were abundant in ancient Egypt (Budge 1969:23) and must have been frequently encountered in the tombs. No doubt the snakes took shelter in the tombs from the heat. This phenomenon leads to numerous formulae being written to protect the deceased from the snakes. Budge (1969:23) mentions that many of these protective formulae were found in the funerary texts in the tomb of Unas, a fifth Dynasty king

Words that were uttered were important. In the Eighth Gate of the underworld are words spoken by the god Horus to the serpent Kheti. He says ‘O my serpent Kheti, thou Mighty Fire, open thy mouth, distend thy jaws, belch thy fire on the enemies of my father Osiris, burn their bodies and consume their souls’ (Budge 1972:374). The enemies of Osiris are no doubt the underworld serpent demons. The reference to Kheti as ‘Mighty Fire’ may well refer to venom spat by the cobra.

An example of serpents used in a vignette intended to protect the dead from serpents is found in chapter CLXXXII of *The Book of the Dead* (Budge 1972:29). Here the use of serpent imagery to protect against serpents forms part of sympathetic magic. The vignette shows the deceased in mummy form attended to by various deities and is divided into three registers. In the top register is Sobek (the crocodile god) holding a serpent in a vertical position. It resembles a serpent staff as the body is upright. Behind him are other gods including a serpent-headed god all holding what look like lizards or baby crocodiles (Budge 1972:29). The mummified form of the deceased, Mut-hetep, occupies the middle register with is deities including Isis and Nephthys. In the lower register are the gods Khnum, Geb and Shu holding serpents vertically, and to the right of them are three other deities, two of whom hold knives (Budge 1972:29).

7.2.3.2 *The Book of Overthrowing Apep*

The serpent monster Apophis, says Budge (1969:324) personified the darkness of the underworld through which the sun god travelled. His original role, it seems, was in the form of the primordial darkness which attempted to stop the first rising of the sun (Budge 1969:324). Considering the crucial role of the sun as an element essential to life it is no wonder that there are numerous inclusions in the Egyptian funerary texts and illustrated vignettes referring to the destruction of Apophis.

There was literature that was recited on a daily basis at Thebes in the temple of Amun-Ra by priests. This literature is referred to as the *Books of overthrowing Apep* (Budge 1969:325). It was made up of several books which described the destruction of Apophis and his evil hoard. Apophis was spat upon, trodden on, speared with a lance, chained and bound, knifed, and set fire to (Budge 1969:325). Furthermore every name by which Apophis was known was cursed (Budge 1969:325).

7.2.3.3 *Spells from the Pyramid Texts*

The Pyramid Texts date back to the 5th and 6th dynasties. They are older than the *Book of the Dead* which incorporates material from the Pyramid Texts. According to Breasted (1959:93) they served several functions, one of which was as magical charms. Some of the charms were recited by priests as the body was interred. Others were intended for use by the deceased. Breasted (1959:95) points out that often the

dividing line between a ritual prayer and charm was not clear, with the exception of serpent charms. They were to protect the deceased from snakes in the ground and also from the same dangers encountered by the sun god Re on his nightly journey through the underworld.

There are a number of utterances from the Pyramid Texts that comprise spells against snakes. Presumably these would be against live snakes that may enter tombs and, according to perception, potentially devour the deceased. These are contained in utterances 226 to 244, 275 to 299, 375 to 399, 502, 727 to 729 and 731 to 733. As they cannot all be recounted here I have selected a few apt examples.

Utterance 227: ‘The head of the great black bull is cut off. O *hpnw*-snake, I say this against you, O god-repelling scorpion, I say this against you. Turn around, slide into the earth, for I say this against you’ (Faulkner 1969:54).

Utterance 233: ‘Fall, O serpent which came forth from the earth! Fall, O flame which came forth from the Abyss! Fall down, crawl away!’ (Faulkner 1969: 55).

Utterance 234: ‘My eye is on you, O you who are on your coils; get down, O you who are on your spine, you who are in the *n3wt*-bush. Turn back because of me, [serpent] rejoicing in two faces’ (Faulkner 1969:56).

Utterance 285: ‘Your two drops of poison are on the way to your poison-sacs. Spit them out at once (?) they being filled with water. O you winker who wears a fillet, O *Sš3w*, rain, that the serpent may become rotten’ (Faulkner 1969:86).

7.2.3.4 *The Hiw-serpent*

In the Pyramid Texts are references to a serpent referred to as *Hiw*. This serpent appears in texts designed to repel harmful snakes (Ward 1978:26). Ward (1978:28) informs us that the *Hiw* serpent only receives mention in Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts where the texts are based on the older Pyramid Texts. Other use of *Hiw* in Coffin Texts refers to its meaning as an ass or as an epithet for Seth (Ward 1978:28).

7.2.3.5 *Methods of slaying the demon underworld serpents*

The Egyptian funerary texts give information via their texts and vignettes as to how Apophis and his evil serpent cohorts could be destroyed. From the *Book of the Dead* we learn of the evil serpent Rerek whose head was cut off by a goddess (Budge 1972:355). Knives were used in the Sixth Hour of the night by five fire-spitting serpents to destroy the enemies of the sun god. Strangulation was another manner in which the serpent demon could be killed. We come across this method in the Seventh

Hour of the night where the scorpion/snake goddess Selqet strangles the serpent Nehaher (Budge 1972:362). In the Eleventh Hour a serpent boomerang is used as a weapon by throwing it at the enemy (Budge 1972:365). In the *Book of Gates* an underworld deity Tem casts a spell over Apophis, slits his head open and slashes his body to pieces (Budge 1972:370). In the Seventh Gate of the *Book of Gates* Seba Apep is an enormous serpent. There are twelve heads emanating from his body which Budge (1972:372) tells us are devoured by the gods after having been crushed. In the Tenth Gate, or division, of the underworld in the *Book of Gates* we learn of Apophis being restrained by a chain (Budge 1972:377). The Egyptian god Bes is referred to by Budge (1972:254) as a serpent slayer. His earliest known image appears on a magic ivory wand (Budge 1972:253).

7.2.3.6 A protective spell against Apophis

A protective spell to protect against the serpent demon Apophis is compiled from a Cairo statue, a stele from Karnak and the *Bremner-Rhind Papyrus* (Borghouts 1978:125). The spell says: 'Be annihilated, rebel! Upon your face you must fall!' The spell wishes blindness upon Apophis along with loss of strength, and a limp body due to being maimed. Apophis is furthermore designated to the 'execution block' where his head will be cut off, his severed neck repeatedly slashed by those with sharp knives. He is destined to be devoured by fire and after his destruction he is cursed with having no heirs (Borghouts 1978:94-95). He is bound by Isis and Nephthys and cursed by the spells of Thoth.

7.2.3.7 Canaanite influence on the pyramid snake spells

Milstein (2007:1) says that there is evidence that some snake spells from the pyramid of Unas may have come from, or have been influenced by Canaanites from Byblos. Female snakes were apparently believed to have been 'mediators for Canaanite magicians' (Milstein 2007:1). The evidence that indicates that the spells were Canaanite influenced comes from proto-Canaanite texts dating to 3000-2400 BCE. Egyptians apparently deferred to Canaanite priests regarding certain venomous snakes because it was believed that the snakes comprehended Canaanite and would listen to a Canaanite priest (Milstein 2007:12).

7.2.4 Specific artefacts of protection

7.2.4.1 Egyptian ivory wands

A number of ivory wands were found from ancient Egypt. The earliest known wands date to around 2800 BCE and are made of hippo ivory (Pinch 2006:40). Apparently the animals depicted on the ivory wands are intended to provide protection, probably via sympathetic magic. Pinch (2006:79) mentions that it is possible that the magical powers harnessed the formidable aspects of the dangerous creatures shown on the wands and these aspects were used as a repellent towards formidable creatures. They also appeared on the rods of magicians.

On the left of the obverse side of one of these wands¹⁸⁶ is a snake-headed god holding a serpent in each hand that resembles a staff (Budge 1972:89).

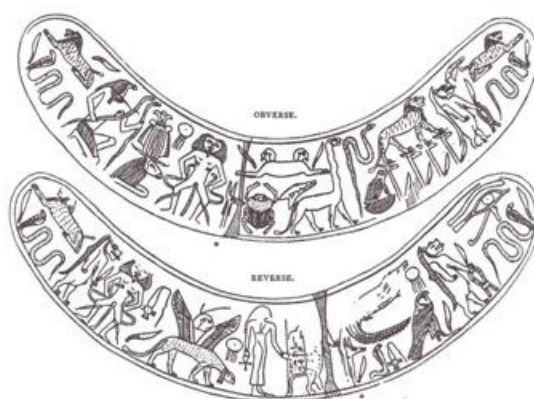


Figure 59: Ivory wand with snake motifs¹⁸⁷

To the right of this god is a Bes-type figure grasping two snakes. On the reverse side is a hooding cobra at each end. These could be protective uraeus cobras. The wand seems to contain the harmful snakes grasped by the Bes-type figure as well as protective serpents in the form of the snake-headed deity with his wands and the uraeus cobras.

7.2.4.2 Nehebkhau amulets

Nehebkhau was an Egyptian serpent deity (cf 6.3.10 and 6.3.12.3) whose image and invocation in texts was utilised to prevent snakes from entering dwellings (Mundkur

¹⁸⁶ British Museum # 18175.

¹⁸⁷ Budge (1972:88).

1983:64). The choice of Nehebkhou may be because his origins were originally ‘sinister’ according to Mundkur (1983:64). This utilisation of Nehebkhou’s image is an example of sympathetic magic. According to Andrews (1994:26) the Nehebkhou amulets were first found in burial contexts relating to the Third Intermediate Period although mention was made of this deity in Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts (cf 7.3.1.2).



Figure 60: Nehebkhou amulet¹⁸⁸

7.2.4.3 *The Upwawet statuette*

Upwawet was a jackal god who served as a protector of the dead (Mundkur 1983:156). A bronze statuette from the Middle Kingdom period shows the god with a pair of hooding cobras intended to repel evil serpents from a tomb.

7.2.4.4 *Snake figurine from Cave IS IV*

Found in Cave IS IV in Syria-Palestine by MacAlister was a 32cm long snake figurine from the Bronze Age which he believed to be used as a prophylactic against snake bite by employing the use of sympathetic magic (Koh 1994:60).

7.2.4.5 *The Nami and Beth Shan suspension pendants*

At both Nami and Beth Shan in Syria-Palestine suspension pendants bearing snake motifs were found in Bronze Age temple areas (Koh 1994:82). It has been noted by Koh (1994:82) that a similarity exists between the Beth Shan serpent pendants and snake pendants found at Tell el Amarna in Egypt. This, according to Koh (1994:82) seems to indicate that the influence for the Beth Shan pendants comes from Egypt. The use of the snake pendants may well have been that they were attached to the garments of priests or related officials and therefore cultic in nature.

¹⁸⁸ Andrews (1994:25).

The Nami pendant was made of gold. The finely etched design reveals a winged female figure with a body composed of two intertwined snakes (Koh 1994:81). According to Koh (1994:81) eight faience pendants were found at Beth Shan. Two of them have a snake body topped by a human head. The other six were all snake shaped. They are cobra-like in appearance which suggests Egyptian influence.

To my mind, if these pendants were hung from the garments of priests, then it is possible that these cultic personnel used the pendants as a form of sympathetic magic and may well therefore have been involved in the handling of snakes.

7.2.4.6 *The Amarna serpent pendants*

The six pendants shown below are found in the Petrie Collection of the Department of Egyptology at the University College in London. These amulets, says Samson (1972:80) had threading holes in them and were therefore able to be used as amulets that were worn. She also notes that they are all cobras. The first five have green, blue-green or green glaze and the sixth is of green glass. These amulets are very small, ranging in size from 0.6cm to 1.2cm.



Figure 61: The Amarna serpent pendants¹⁸⁹

According to Morris & Morris (1965:41-42) asps were kept in temples and cared for by priests. Amulets such as the Amarna suspension pendants may therefore have been used on priests' garments as sympathetic magic to provide protection from being bitten by the snakes in their care.

7.2.4.7 *Snake-head amulets*

Serpent-head amulets or the neck and head portion of the serpent were intended to protect the individual from snake bite (Petrie 1972:25). The examples given by Petrie cover the prehistoric to XXVIth Dynasties and were worn at the person's throat, base of the neck and base of the chest. It seems that these were also positioned on

¹⁸⁹ Samson (1972:80). Collection numbers (from left to right): UC 1173, UC 1171, UC 1169, UC 2148, UC 1921, UC 23644.

mummies. Materials used in the manufacture of these amulets include red and yellow jasper, carnelian, haematite¹⁹⁰, red limestone, agate, ivory and gold. Blue, brown and green glass was also used, as were glazes (Petrie 1972:26). Some of these amulets were inscribed. Andrews (1994:17) informs us that these were crafted from carnelian and jasper (both red stones) during the New Kingdom period and were intended for use by royalty and important officials to protect them from snake bites. Budge (1971:59) says that these snake-head amulets represent the magical powers of Isis in keeping tombs free from snakes. A carnelian snake's head amulet was amongst the 143 amulet objects removed from Tutankhamun's mummy wrappings (Brier 2001:194).

7.2.4.8 *Lion amulets*

Lions are known to be strong and fierce. Despite the fact that this feline is not a killer of snakes, lion amulets were used with the intention of preventing snake bite (Pinch 2006:118). A faience lion was suspended on red linen and a spell was recited over it to close the mouths of snakes. The amulet could be worn on the individual's hand and was also used to provide protection in the bedroom, presumably enabling the individual to sleep soundly (Pinch 2006:118).

7.2.4.9 *Cippi*

The Egyptians crafted stelae with images of Horus trampling dangerous creatures such as snakes and crocodiles (Mundkur 1983:65). These *cippi* were used apotropaically to protect individuals from snake bite. *Cippi* date from the New Kingdom period onwards, into the Hellenistic era. They are essentially healing stellae but one of their functions was protection from snake bites and scorpion stings (Ritner 2003a:197). As a protective measure they were placed in dwellings and gardens and, according to Budge (1969:207), even buried in the ground to protect against dangerous creatures. Spells also appeared on miniature *cippi* that the individual could carry around.

¹⁹⁰ On a Graeco-Egyptian magical papyrus a reference to 'snake's blood' is interpreted as a reference to haematite (Pinch 2006:80).

7.2.4.10 Protective livestock amulets

A vessel found at Chogha Mish in ancient Mesopotamia (Iran) exhibits goats being attacked by snakes (McDonald 1989:145). This vessel may have been used in rituals intended to protect livestock such as goats from being bitten by snakes.

7.2.4.11 Wooden Horus amulets

Similar to the figure of Horus on the *cippi* was a wooden statue of Horus holding snakes and trampling dangerous creatures underfoot. An anti-venom spell was chanted over this statue. According to Pinch (2006:101) there are stone examples of this Horus statue ranging in date from the 14th century BCE to the 2nd century CE.

7.2.4.12 Bes amulets

The Egyptian god Bes was an exceptionally ugly deity. He was a large-headed god with a squat body. It was believed that his ugliness would scare off demons and he was particularly a protector of children and women in labour (Watterson 1999:118-119). Bes is mentioned by Jayne (1962:55) as a deity who ‘strangled or devoured’ serpents. Images of him were placed above the entrances to rooms where people slept. During the Middle Kingdom period he was especially seen as a protector of children from dangerous creatures.

Egyptian headrests of the 2nd millennium BCE sometimes had images of the god Bes grasping snakes and spears. These images were intended to protect the sleeper from danger in the night represented by snakes (Pinch 2006:43). An example of a wooden headrest with Bes imagery dates to the 18th millennium BCE. Magical protection was believed to be provided by images of Bes grasping serpents (Aruz 2008:149). Presumably the imagery was intended to protect the sleeping individual from snakes.

7.2.4.13 An Egyptian medicinal charm

A protective medicinal charm mentioned by Pinch (2006:82) consists of garlic ground up in beer. This mixture was then sprinkled throughout the tomb or dwelling at night to act as a repellent towards snakes as well as scorpions and ghosts.

7.2.4.14 A protective statue of Ramesses III

Pinch (2006:101) also makes mention of a chapel in Egypt's Eastern desert. In the chapel was a statue of Ramesses III with a goddess. They are seated on thrones on which were inscribed spells to protect against dangerous creatures. Pinch (2006:102) explains that this chapel was located on an expedition route and was probably visited by those who worked on mines and quarries and would therefore encounter numerous snakes and scorpions. The statue was therefore intended to provide protection.

7.2.5 Protective serpent boats

7.2.5.1 Egyptian underworld boats

In ancient Egyptian underworld imagery the serpent was used in a protective capacity by either forming a boat in which the deity could travel, or by forming part of a boat. As the Egyptian sun god Re traverses part of the underworld he is safely ensconced in his barge which at one point is formed from a serpent (Mundkur 1983:64). Another serpent, Mehen, surrounds the sun god on the boat, ensuring extra protection from the evil serpent, Apophis. This serpent imagery incorporates the use of sympathetic magic in order to repel the serpent demon.

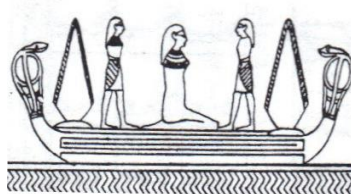


Figure 62: Underworld serpent boat, the boat of Nepr¹⁹¹

In the illustration above is a boat with a uraeus cobra at the bow and the stern. This is one of four boats that protect the boat in which the sun god travels through the underworld in the Second Hour of the night. The deity in this boat is Nepr who is an agricultural deity and a form of Osiris, says Budge (1969:210).



Figure 63: Re in his serpent boat¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Budge (1969:209).

¹⁹² Budge (1969:217).

The illustration above comes from the Fourth Hour of the night. Here the sun god, Re, travels on his serpent boat through the underworld.

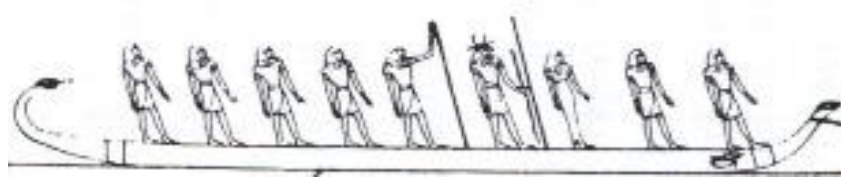


Figure 64: Re in his serpent boat¹⁹³

In the Fifth Hour of the night Re is still found travelling in his protective serpent boat.

7.2.6 Burial amulets

Protective amulets for the dead were extensively used in ancient Egypt. Such use is not as apparent in Mesopotamia or Syria-Palestine.

7.2.6.1 *The serpent game*

Evidence of a game board with a coiled serpent has been found from very early times (from approximately 3000 BCE onwards according to Wikipedia.org). However, the example in Mundkur (1983:63) is from the pre-dynastic era (4000 – 3200 BCE). Mundkur (1983:62) explains that the game was intended to be played by the spirit of the deceased. The deceased rolled a marble away from the serpent's head in the centre of the board. The marble was supposed to come to rest in a groove on the serpent's body. This was considered 'winning' and by winning, the spirit of the deceased was preserved from being bitten by a snake. Referring to an ascension text, utterance 332 of the Pyramid Texts, Sethe (in Faulkner 1969:107) describes the text 'as if escape had been won in a game on this board'. The text reads: 'I am this one who escaped from the coiled serpent, I have ascended in a blast of fire, having turned myself about'.

¹⁹³ Budge (1969:221).

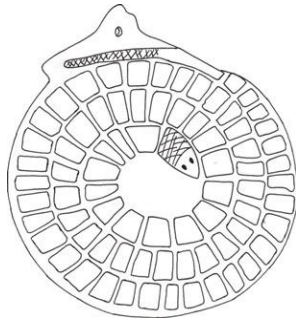


Figure 65a¹⁹⁴



Figure 65b¹⁹⁵

The serpent game board

The modern day snake board game ‘Mehen’ appears to have derived from the ancient Egyptian game.

7.2.6.2 Snake-headed amulets

The snake-headed amulet was an example of sympathetic magic and it was believed that by placing it with the deceased in the tomb the deceased would be protected from being eaten by the snakes and worms of the underworld (Budge 2001:147). The snake’s head has been found in amulet form from the New Kingdom period onwards. However, says Andrews (1994:85) they were found depicted on friezes on the earlier Middle Kingdom coffins. Andrews (1994:85) also informs us that the amulets were found in 18th Dynasty royal tombs such as those of Tutankhamun, Thutmose IV and the tomb of Yuya and Tuya. They have also been found in 19th Dynasty and Third Intermediate Period burials. The amulet was made of red material such as stone (for example haematite, carnelian, and jasper), glass or faience and was apparently also worn by the living (Budge 2001:147).

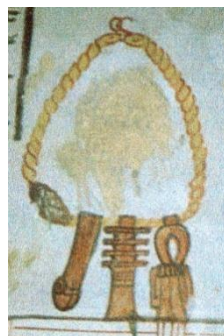


Figure 66: Snake head amulet¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Illustration by Wendy Golding (2012). See Mundkur (1983:63) for a similar game board.

¹⁹⁵ Limestone game board, probably 2nd Dynasty (2890-2686 BCE). British Museum number EA 66216. Photograph: Wendy Golding 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Andrews (1994, figure 63). The illustration comes from the tomb of Sennefer of Thebes and dates to

7.2.6.3 *The Book of the Dead*

The ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is considered to be an amulet. It contains nearly two hundred spells or chapters written on papyrus and illustrated with vignettes. These were intended to help the dead pass through the underworld (Andrews 1994:6). Copies were placed within burial chambers, sometimes on the mummy or within the coffin. The *Book of the Dead* does not predate the New Kingdom period, according to Andrews (1994:6). Much of its material is based on Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts. These in turn were based on the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts. Refer to 7.2.7 for detailed protective serpent iconography of the Egyptian underworld relating to the funerary texts such as the *Book of the Dead*.

7.2.7 Egyptian underworld iconography

Various protective serpents of the Egyptian underworld appeared in vignettes from the *Book of the Dead* that decorated tomb walls. This is clearly sympathetic magic – using snake images to repel snake demons. For example, the serpent Mehen appears in a scene where he provides a protective shield around the sun god (Budge 1972:96). Kheti is depicted as a fire-spitting serpent that protects the sun god by spitting a spray of fire over the enemy (Budge 1972:95).

7.2.7.1 *The Book of Pylons*

In the *Book of Pylons* there occurs a number of examples of protective serpent iconography. The Amduat, or underworld was divided into sections called hours. In the First Hour is a representation of the sun god's boat. He appears as a scarab beetle on a disc (Budge 1969:179). This image is encircled by a protective serpent with its tail in its mouth.



Figure 67: The scarab and sun disc surrounded by a serpent¹⁹⁷

circa 1420 BCE.
¹⁹⁷ Budge (1969:179).

Each gate separating each hour had a protective serpent. In the Second Hour the sun god appears on his boat within his shrine which is enveloped by the protective serpent, Mehen. This serpent protects the shrine in all the hours of the night. Within the shrine another serpent stands perpendicularly upon its tail. The gates of the Fourth, Fifth, Eighth and Ninth Hours of the night have an additional two protective uraeus cobras that protect the corridors. Balls of fire drop from their mouths (Budge 1969:183). In the top register of the Third Hour of the night are the shrines of twelve gods of the underworld. A long serpent drapes itself over the shrines for protection (Budge 1969:182-183). In the Fourth Hour of the night are depicted ten uraeus cobras that emerge from the Lake of Uraei. Their role is to protect the sun god from his enemies. Before the shrine of Osiris is another protective cobra. It is in the Eighth Hour that we find the fire-breathing serpent, Kheti (Budge 1969:193). In the Ninth Hour vignette can clearly be seen a serpent boat. The stern and prow of the boat each terminates in a serpent head bearing a royal crown (Budge 1969:195).



Figure 68: Serpent boat with crowned serpents¹⁹⁸

The Tenth Hour of the underworld is filled with protective serpent imagery. The wall at the entrance gate is guarded by sixteen uraeus cobras (Budge 1969:198). There are four serpent-headed human forms called the Hentiu who are armed with knives to protect the sun god. In the entourage behind the boat is a protective uraeus upon a boat. Behind this is a winged uraeus (Budge 1969:197). Behind this is another cobra with two human heads, presumably one to look in front and one to look behind. A little further down the procession is a platform upon which stands Horus-Set. Each end of the platform has three uraeus cobras. Three face forwards and three watch behind (Budge 1969:196-197).

7.2.7.2 *The Book of that which is in the underworld*

The Egyptian *Book of that which is in the underworld* was also filled with vignettes with protective serpent imagery. It is not possible to give all the examples so a few, from the tomb of Seti I, will suffice here.

¹⁹⁸ Budge (1969:195).

A number of examples occur in the vignette of the First Hour of the night. On the far right of the second line from the top is a perpendicular snake in the procession (Budge 1969:206). In the next line down three horizontal serpents precede a boat containing Khepri. In front of these are six anthropomorphic figures (at least two of which have falcon heads) each holding a serpent staff. In front of these figures is a human form holding the crossed serpent staffs. In the lowest register are twelve fire-spitting cobras (Budge 1969:206).

In an illustration (Budge 1969:209) it is shown that the Second Hour of the night contains protective serpents in the form of staffs and boats. In the top line is a serpent staff. In the middle line the sun god on the boat holds a serpent staff. Three figures on the bottom line also appear to hold serpent staffs. Uraeus cobras are also found in this vignette. Two appear at the front of the sun god's boat. The next boat in the row is a serpent boat with prow and stern of protective cobras. This, says Budge (1969:210,) is the boat of Nepr, god of vegetation and grain.

In the illustration of the Third Hour the middle register shows three boats upon which various deities stand (Budge 1969:213). There is a perpendicular serpent staff on each boat. Each faces forward as if to observe potential danger on the way forward (Budge 1969:213). The Forth Hour is a region of 'huge and fearsome' serpents (Budge 1969:217). The boat that the sun god travels in is a serpent boat. This clearly illustrates the belief in sympathetic magic where snakes are used to repel the evil serpents. The way through this dark passage is lit by the flames spat forth by the boat serpent (Budge 1969:218).

The Fifth Hour contains yet another serpent boat upon which various deities stand. The sun god, holding a serpent staff, is among them (Budge 1969:221). Also interesting in this vignette is the circle of the god Seker. Seker is hawk-headed. Within the circle he stands upon a winged double-headed serpent which guards the god himself. Budge (1969:222) describes this serpent as the 'god watching over himself'. This hybrid is therefore an aspect of Seker. There is also a large vaulted chamber in this hour which contains the 'germ of life' and this is protected by a serpent named Ter (Budge 1969:224).

In the Sixth Hour the sun god is safely ensconced in his shrine upon his boat holding the serpent staff (Budge 1969:225). There are nine serpents that spit fire. Each one has a knife (Budge 196:230). There are also three houses of Re each of which has a protective serpent (Budge 1969:229). In the Seventh Hour we find Af-Asar, a god seated upon a throne with the protective serpent, Mehen, covering him (Budge 1969:231). The Eighth Hour shows the sun god protected by Mehen (Budge 1969:237). We see the sun god once again holding a serpent staff in the Tenth Hour and still under the protective canopy of Mehen (Budge 1969:247).

There are numerous uraeus cobras in part of the Eleventh Hour vignette. There are four deities seated upon pairs of uraeus cobras whilst two cobras carry the two crowns of Egypt (Budge 1969:255). In the Twelfth Hour the sun god's boat passes completely through the body of a serpent. Upon emerging out of the other side the boat is towed by various underworld deities. Twelve of these are goddesses each of whom had a snake upon her head and shoulders. The fire spat forth from these cobras protects the sun god from Apophis (Budge 1969:258), whilst another serpent named Nesemkhef is responsible for destroying more enemies of the sun god.

7.2.8 Protective animal images and texts

In ancient Egypt it was noted that certain animals were enemies of the snake. These include the cat, the ibis and the ichneumon, or mongoose. Images of these animals were believed to provide some form of protection against snakes.

7.2.8.1 The cat

The cat (*Felis verreauxi maniculata*) was domesticated and revered by the Egyptians (Watterson 1999:201). They called it *mau*. One of its functions was that of snake killer (Watterson 1999:201). As a result a number of images of a cat slaying an evil serpent with a knife have been encountered. Mundkur (1983:65) informs us that the Pyramid Texts show two underworld serpent demons, In-Dif and Djeser-tep, being slaughtered by a cat. In my opinion this kind of imagery was designed to protect the deceased from snakes. The *Papyrus of Hunefer*, which dates to the late 2nd millennium BCE, provides another example, showing Apophis being killed by the

knife-wielding cat Mafdet (Mundkur 1983:65). Andrews (1994:25) mentions a lion god Mayhes who was involved in the battle against Apophis.

An Egyptian spell for ‘conjuring a cat’ comes from the *Ddhr* statue and, says Borghouts (1978:56) is supplemented by the Metternich stele. The spell refers to a cat that has been stung by a scorpion. One of the lines reads: ‘Your hands (claws) are saved from the poison of any biting snake’. This possibly refers to the cat’s ability or role as a slayer of snakes. This notion is reinforced further along in the spell with the following lines which discuss the limbs of the cat: ‘Each one of them is the protection of your body, from your head to your footsoles. They have slain and punished the poison of any male snake, any female snake, any scorpion and any reptile that is in any limb of this cat under my fingers’. The cat is obviously important enough to warrant healing and protection.

7.2.8.2 *The ibis*

It was believed that the ibis would protect Egypt from winged serpent invasions, says Mundkur (1983:103). He also reveals that, according to legend, Moses invoked the assistance of ibises in order to traverse an area that was rife with venomous snakes.

7.2.8.3 *The ichneumon*

The ichneumon, or mongoose, is a well-known adversary of snakes. It was deified by the Egyptians (Budge 1972:81). In the *Book of Ami Tuat*¹⁹⁹ in the Second Hour of the night was a boat containing an ichneumon (Budge 1972:359). Watterson (1999: 24) informs us of a legend whereby it was believed that the ichneumon was an incarnation of the god Atum. This is because the god transformed himself into an ichneumon in order to protect himself from an attacking snake. There are a few spells in the Pyramid Texts that make mention of the ichneumon known as Mafdet. It is mentioned by Faulkner (1969:88) that Mafdet is a deity who appears as a mongoose. Three of these spells or utterances are mentioned here as examples of the use of the ichneumon in providing protection against the serpent.

¹⁹⁹ The *Book of Ami Tuat* is a lengthy mortuary text. Budge (1972:159) comments that the lengthiest version that he was aware of and personally examined was in the tomb of Thothmes III. Like the *Book of the dead* the night was split into divisions called hours.

Utterance 230: ‘Your poison fangs [?] be in the earth, your ribs be in the hole! Pour out the water²⁰⁰ while the Two Kites stand by; your mouth is closed by the instrument of punishment, and the mouth of the instrument of punishment is closed by Mafdet’ (Faulkner 1969:54).

Utterance 295: ‘Mafdet leaps at the neck of the in-dif snake, she does it again at the neck of the serpent with raised head. Who is he who will survive? It is I who will survive’ (Faulkner 1969:88).

Utterance 297: ‘My hand has come upon you, the avenger [?] is this which has come upon you, [even] Mafdet, pre-eminent in the Mansion of Life; she strikes you on your face, she scratches you on your eyes, so that you fall into your faeces and crawl in your urine. Fall! Lie down! Crawl away for your mother Nut sees you’ (Faulkner 1969:88)

7.2.9 Ritual activities

7.2.9.1 *Burning of wax effigies*

In ancient Egypt wax figures of the demon serpent Apophis were burnt on a daily basis in Amun-Ra’s temple in Thebes. Spells were recited in conjunction with this in order to prevent Re’s passage at night through the underworld being obstructed by Apophis (Budge 2001:9). The wax image of Apophis was enveloped in papyrus upon which his name was written. Next it was stamped upon by a priest (Budge 1972:517). The trampled figure was then stabbed with a knife, thrown into a fire that had been made from special herbs, and crocodile urine was poured over it (Budge 1972:518). This ritual could be repeated up to three times a day. It appears that certain adverse weather conditions and the time of year would dictate the frequency with which the ritual would be performed (Budge 1972:518). One would assume that these conditions would be those where the appearance of the sun would be threatened, for example by rain clouds.

7.2.9.2 *Mixing of protective remedies*

In Mesopotamia, to protect against the evil of a snake, a mixture of ingredients such as gold, silver, fenugreek, tamarisk and water was mixed (McDonald 1989:38). Preventative measures in ancient Egypt could be taken by placing various substances at the entrance to the snake’s hole. Such substances include dried fish (specifically Tilapia), garlic or natron. The intention was to keep the snake in its hole (Halioua, Ziskind & Debevoise 2005:143).

²⁰⁰ Faulkner (1969:55) maintains that ‘water’ in this context refers to poison.

7.2.9.3 A *Namburbi* ritual

A Babylonian ritual action is outlined in the *Namburbi text* entitled ‘ritual for the evil of a snake’. The text seems to be portentous in nature and contains the action to be taken to avert death. It states that if a person sees a snake on the first day of *Nisan* (at the beginning of the year) or on the first day of *Ayar*, then he will die during the course of the year. In order to avoid this he must gash his head (which will then apparently be sore for a three month period) and he must be clean-shaven (Caplice 1974:14).

7.2.9.4 A ritual fire

Onion fumes were believed to repel snakes (Sauneron (1989:186). Sauneron (1989:186) presents a tradition by Bougery and Panchot.²⁰¹ In this protective ritual a magical fire is burned around the camp of soldiers. There are various plants specified which are burned in this fire along with ‘stag horns’ (Sauneron 1989:186). There are various types of plant named ‘stag horns’ but I could not find any endemic to North Africa so we could assume that literally the horns of stags were burned in the fire. The burning of these elements was believed to be a repellent to snakes. The tradition mentions that when the soldiers returned to their camp they were not bothered by snakes at night. Now interestingly a very similar ritual is given in Phillips (1995:393) relating to the time of the Romans. The ritual comes from the Roman poet Lucan’s work *Bellum ciuile* regarding the Roman civil war (Phillips 1995:391). In Lucan’s account the Roman soldiers were fearful of snakes during their march across North Africa. During their march they encounter a people called the *Psylli* who lived in the region of modern day Libya (Phillips 1995:395). They were believed to be snake handlers and seemed to have magical cures for snake bite and have repellents to keep snakes at bay (Phillips 1995:398-399). According to Lucan, recounted in Phillips (1995:393), the *Psylli* built a fire to burn herbs, fragrant wood and the ‘horns of a stag’ as a snake bite repellent for the Roman soldiers’ camp. Sauneron does not mention Lucan so it is not clear if his information is originally from the same source or not. I speculate that if this is not the case, the ritual may have been one commonly used as a long-standing tradition over many centuries in North Africa.

²⁰¹ Unfortunately this does not appear to be referenced in Sauneron (1989) so I have not been able to establish if this was an entirely Egyptian tradition or not.

7.2.10 Myths and legends

Various myths were designed to provide protection in their mere telling. The essence of these is the victory of order over chaos. Chapter Three introduced the serpents of chaos over which order eventually emerges victorious. The conquest of the Ugaritic Yam by Baal provides an example from Syria-Palestine, as does the destruction of Leviathan, Rahab and Tannin by Yahweh. The mythology involving the serpents of chaos has already been discussed in Chapter Three.

Budge (1969:325) compares the destruction of the Egyptian Apophis to similar stories from elsewhere in the ancient Near East. From Mesopotamia comes the destruction of Tiamat by Marduk, and from Syria-Palestine comes the destruction of the dragon (serpent hybrid) by the god Baal. Tiamat was caught in a net and rendered magically impotent before she was sliced up. Budge (1969:327) tells us that the dragon in the Baal story was neutralised by the insertion of pitch and fat into its mouth with hair.

7.2.10.1 *The Tablet of Destinies, herbs and the red stone*

The performing or re-enactment of the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* would have reinforced the myth's intention to demonstrate the victory of order over chaos. The Tablet of Destinies which is captured by Marduk from Tiamat contains magical powers. It is therefore an amulet which is used by Marduk to destroy Tiamat and protect creation (Budge 2001:xxi). As the *Enuma Elish* indicates, amulets were believed to have been used by the gods (Budge 2001:xx). When Marduk set out to destroy Tiamat he carried a bunch of herbs in one hand and a red stone between his lips, shaped like an eye (Budge 2001:xx). Red stone such as haematite (or Blood Stone) was believed to stop bleeding and was used to heal snake bite in its powdered form (Budge 2001:314). So it would seem that this red stone may have been intended to protect Marduk from being attacked by the serpent monster, Tiamat.

7.3 THE SERPENT AS A FORM OF PROTECTION

The very aspects of a snake that ancient humankind feared were put to use in apotropaic magic to protect places and individuals from harm. Serpent symbolism was widely utilised in this regard. The use of the serpent as a form of protection against

snakes, and in sympathetic magic, has been dealt with in 7.2 above. This section focusses on the use of the serpent as a form of protection against non-serpent elements.

The Egyptian uraeus cobra provides a prime example of a protective serpent symbol and appears in numerous amulet forms from texts to jewellery to architectural decoration. The fear that ancient humankind felt for the cobra turned it into the ideal symbol of power for the Egyptian pharaohs. It was believed that, because it would be feared by the enemy, the pharaoh would be protected (Currid 1997:89). This same uraeus likewise provided protection for many deities as it appears in many of their headdresses. In addition it was believed that the pharaoh received magical powers from the uraeus (Currid 1997:91).

Texts such as the following taken from the Pyramid Texts reflect the perception and sentiment of the one who wears the uraeus: ‘O Magician, O Fiery Snake! Let there be terror of me like the terror of thee’ (Currid 1997:147). It is clear from this text that the fear of the serpent transfers into a fear of the one who wears the uraeus.

7.3.1 Specific artefacts of protection

7.3.1.1 Sun disc and uraeus cobra amulets

Dynastic amulets are defined as those that were imbued with power and authority. Most of these amulets are therefore linked to royalty and are found in royal sceptres and crowns. A large number of dynastic amulets have cobras on them and the link to royalty ensured the cobra was perceived as a royal animal in ancient Egypt (Andrews 1994:74).

From the Early Dynastic period onwards the uraeus symbolised kingship. It also signified divinity. In its coiled form the uraeus was referred to as ‘*mehen*’ (Andrews 1994:75).

Egyptian amulets incorporating the sun disc and uraeus cobra served as protection and represented the sun god Ra (Petrie 1972:22). These amulets date from Dynasty I right through to Dynasty XXX. They were made from a wide variety of stones including

diorite, obsidian, steatite, limestone, basalt, haematite, carnelian, black or green syenite, feldspar, lapis lazuli and serpentine. Interestingly serpentine was used to protect against serpent bite (Petrie 1972:52), and limestone was used against venom (Petrie 1972:52). Petrie (1972:22) mentions that the sun-uraeus amulet was not often found on the mummy but was more commonly used at temple entrances or on figurines. Presumably the use of this amulet at a temple entrance was believed to provide protection to the temple and its contents.

7.3.1.2 *Serpent with arms amulet*

Some blue or green glazed amulets depicted a serpent figure with arms. This was Nehebkhou, a serpent judge of the underworld (Petrie 1972:49). Nehebkhou protected the deceased by pointing out the way that the deceased must go in the underworld. These amulets date to approximately the XXth Dynasty. Andrews (1994:25) mentions blue, green and turquoise amulets bearing the image of Nehebkhou that were manufactured by the ancient Egyptians.

7.3.1.3 *Serpent stones*

The *senut* was a pair of stelae bearing serpent motifs in ancient Egypt. These motifs, explains Mundkur (1983:102) were representations of Wadjet and Nekhbet. The pair of stones could be found outside a dual shrine known as *iterty*. The *iterty* contained sacred objects of kings and the *senut*'s function was to protect the contents of the shrines.

7.3.1.4 *Deity figurines with uraeus cobras*

Little figurines of deities could be worn as amulets by the living and buried with the deceased. Budge (2001:155) mentions that he made a list of many of these for the British Museum for a guide to the Egyptian collections. Fifty seven of these are shown in *Amulets and Superstitions*²⁰² (Budge 2001:156-158). Isis, Qudšu (Ketesh), Nekhbet, Renenutet, Neith, Wadjet (Uatchit), Selqet (Serqet) are all represented in human form but have serpent forms or associations. It is interesting to note that these seven are all female. Many of the figurines contain a uraeus cobra, usually in the headdress. The drawings are tiny but in my opinion it would appear that at least

²⁰² In *Amulets and superstitions* Budge discusses the meaning and use of amulets. It also appears under the title *Amulets and magic*.

twenty out of the fifty seven figurines accommodate the protective uraeus cobra (Budge 2001:156-158).

7.3.1.5 Serpent standards in Egypt and Syria-Palestine

Currid (1997:151) informs us that the Egyptians used standards which were believed to be infused with the power of deities. A standard could embody a deity. Furthermore serpents were often displayed on top of standards (Currid 1997:152). In Syria-Palestine a bronze standard was found with serpent symbols on it. This concept could well have transferred from Egypt to Syria-Palestine.

A Late Bronze Age bronze standard was found in Hazor's Lower City (Building 6211, Area C). Koh (1994:79) describes it as being silver plated, rectangular and 125cm x 7cm in size. He also explains that a tang on the standard suggests that it was originally mounted on a pole. Snake figures are evident on the standard. The building in which it was found may have been a temple or shrine.

Also found at Hazor, dating to the Late Bronze Age, was a bronze snake figurine. Koh (1994:71) believes that this figurine should be identified as a snake due to its chevron-shaped design. The tail, according to Koh (1994:71) is split and has a hole. This would enable the figurine to be mounted on an object such as a pole and is reminiscent of the bronze serpent of Moses. Koh (1994:72) notes that this figurine was found in the orthostat temple's cella.

7.3.1.6 Mesopotamian votive seals

Cylinder seals had a number of uses, most typically administrative. They could also function as amulets and were believed to be imbued with magical properties. According to Collon (1987:119) the themes inscribed on the seals and the deities bestowed protection on the wearer or owner. The owner of the seal was believed to be protected from sickness, amongst other things. Equally important as the design on the seal was the material from which it was made. As Collon (1987:100) points out, the stones were believed to contain magical properties.

Collon (1987:131) describes votive seals as those 'dedicated by worshippers to the gods'. Some of these seals were dedicated to serpent gods and those with serpent

aspects or associations. According to Collon (1987:131) many seals in this category appeared from the 3rd millennium BCE onwards. In dedicating seals to the gods, the wearers would presumably hope for a measure of protection from the gods to whom the seals were dedicated, and the seals therefore functioned as amulets.

An example of such an amulet comes from Heft Tepe in modern day Iran and dates to *circa* 1350 BCE. It was the personal seal of a king Tept-Ahar. The seal shows a serpent deity, probably Inshushinak, seated upon a coiled serpent handing a rod and ring of power to a figure which may be Tept-Ahar himself. With this action the serpent god recognises Tept-Ahar as king. The inscription read ‘Tept-Ahar, king of Susa and Anzan, servant of the gods Kirwishir and Inshushunak. May they, in the good grace of their heart, recognise him as long as he lives’ (Collon 1987:128).

7.3.1.7 Mesopotamian boundary stones (*kudurrus*)

A *kudurru* is a large stone that functions as a legal document regarding the granting or sale of land. Presumably the stone was used to demarcate or identify land ownership. Smaller clay copies were kept in the temple archives. These *kudurrus*, or boundary stones, are primarily associated with the Kassite Babylonians. They are endemic to southern Mesopotamia and generally date from the Kassite to the Neo-Babylonian periods (Black & Green 2008:113). Many of the *kudurrus* were found in Susa which is where they were removed to by the Elamites. Deities represented on the *kudurrus* were believed to be witnesses to the agreement between the parties involved. The god Marduk was represented on the *kudurru* by the horned serpent. A good example of a *kudurru* is shown below. A serpent can clearly be seen on the left side of the stone running from top to bottom. The *kudurru*, which was found in Sippar, is that of a chariot commander who fought against the Elamites. His name was Ritti-Marduk and he was rewarded in the form of a tax exemption with regards to his ancestral territory. It dates to the late 2nd millennium BCE during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I and is located in the British Museum.²⁰³ Many of the *kudurrus* have serpents on them or serpent hybrids representing deities. As witnesses to the agreement they function as protectors of the law.

²⁰³ Information sourced from display sign in the British Museum. Item ME 90858.



Figure 69: *Kudurru* of Ritti-Marduk²⁰⁴

An enlargement of the *mušhuššu* dragon from the *kudurru* representing Marduk is shown below.



Figure 70: The *mušhuššu* dragon on the *kudurru* of Ritti-Marduk²⁰⁵

7.3.1.8 Egyptian clay cobras and magic spells

Szpakowska (2003:114) mentions fragments of clay cobras and wavy-edged pottery bowls found at Amarna. It would appear that in their intact form each bowl had a cobra figurine inside it. One possible interpretation, says Szpakowska (2003:114) is that these were votive items associated with the cobra goddess Renenutet, goddess of the harvest. I would suggest that by appealing to Renenutet the harvest would hopefully be protected from rodents and other phenomena that may otherwise destroy the crops.

²⁰⁴ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2011), taken in the British Museum.

²⁰⁵ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2011), taken in the British Museum.

It would appear that a number of similar clay cobras has been found at various sites in Egypt as well as along the Levantine coast (see map in Szpakowska 2003:114). These cobras, says Szpakowska (2003:119) have been found in dwellings and military structures. Szpakowska (2003:119) suggests that they may be associated with other cobra goddesses aside from Renenutet. These include Meretseger, Neith, Wadjet, Weret Hekau (goddess of magic) or Mut, who Szpakowska explains is linked to the uraeus. The god Nehebkaui is suggested as another possibility.

Szpakowska (2003:119) also suggests that the clay cobras may possibly be linked to spells to repel bad dreams. In the *Leiden Papyrus*, for example, is a spell that calls upon Wadjet to assist in the repulsion of bad dreams with the use of fire. The spell contained in the Gardiner ostracon is another example. These clay cobras tend to date to the New Kingdom period (Szpakowska 2003:122).

7.3.1.9 *The Gardiner Ostracon*

The *Gardiner Ostracon* is of limestone, dating to the Ramesside period and is presumed to come from Deir el-Medina (Ritner 1990:25). It now resides in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. It contains a spell designed to protect the sleeping person from 'night terrors' such as ghosts and spirits of the deceased (Ritner 1990:26). There are elements in the translation that indicate snakes were called upon to assist in the protection of the sleeping person. The spirit of the deceased is described as being 'destined for the Evening Meal of the one in the act of striking' (Ritner 1990:26). This probably refers to a snake. The hearts of the deceased are described as being offered to the 'striker'. Their limbs would apparently not escape the 'four Noble Ladies' (Ritner 1990:26). The spell had to be recited over figurines of four uraeus cobras with 'flames' in their mouths. One was placed in each corner of the room where the sleeper lay. As the recitation was over four clay uraeus cobras it is possible they represented the four Noble Ladies. Ritner (1990:32) compares the 'four Noble Ladies of this ostracon' to the mention of 'the four Noble Ladies with flames in their mouths' in the *Papyrus Chester Beatty VIII* (P.BM 10688) which does tend to indicate that they are uraeus cobras. Ritner (1990:36) mentions that there are four goddesses in the Tenth Hour of the night in the underworld. Each bears a cobra upon her head and goes before the sun god's boat to provide light. He believes they can be aligned with the four Noble Ladies and that they are protective goddesses. Pinch (2006:149) thinks

that the four Noble Ladies may be the same four goddesses who protect the sarcophagus, namely Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Selqet. All of these goddesses have a serpent form or association.

7.3.1.10 A royal sword from Byblos

A ceremonial sickle sword to represent victory was found in the Royal Necropolis of Byblos in the tomb of prince Ip-shemu-abi (Hakiman 2008:58). It dates to the early 3rd millennium BCE and shows traces of Egyptian influence. The blade of the wooden-handled sword is curved. On each side of the blade is a beautiful scaled uraeus cobra (Hakiman 2008:58). The choice of the uraeus cobra is apt. It is known as a protector of royalty and its placement on the blade was probably to serve as a form of protection for the owner of the sword. The use of the uraeus cobra also indicates the Egyptian influence that had filtered into the Syro-Palestinian region.

7.3.2 The serpent staff as a form of protection

In Chapter Four the use of the rod or staff as a magician's healing tool and tool of power was discussed. It appears that the serpent staff was also used as a tool of protection, particularly in ancient Egyptian imagery relating to the deceased. Weret Hekau was the cobra goddess of magic which Pinch (2006:11) mentions may be the goddess in the form of a serpent represented in magician's staffs and wands.

In the Egyptian context information regarding the magician's wand as an instrument of protection comes from the *Brugsch Papyrus*. From this papyrus we learn that the god Horus had a staff made of acacia wood and he says: 'Praise be unto thee, thou proper staff that dost protect the limbs, thou wand of sacred acacia ... my protection is in my hand' (Jayne 1962:43).

Numerous examples from the *Book of the Dead* exist where protective figures are associated with serpent staffs.



Figure 71: Protective figures with serpent staffs in the First Hour of the night²⁰⁶

This illustration above depicts the First Hour of the night in the *Book of the Underworld* where six protective figures bearing serpent staffs precede the boat carrying the scarab beetle.

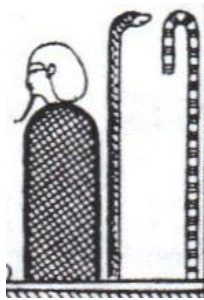


Figure 72: Serpent staff behind deity²⁰⁷

Here the serpent staff appears behind a protective deity in the Second Hour of the night. Its appearance with the protective deity suggests its use as a tool of protection.



Figure 73: Serpent staffs and protective figures²⁰⁸

The vignette above shows three boats that preceded the boat of the sun god, Re. Some of the protective figures aboard these boats are forms of Osiris (Budge 1969:214). There are serpent staffs present on all three of these protective boats. Once again, the serpent staff is associated with protection.

²⁰⁶ Budge (1969:206).

²⁰⁷ Budge (1969:209).

²⁰⁸ Budge (1969:213).



Figure 74: Falcon deity with serpent staff²⁰⁹

In the vignette of the Eleventh Hour of the night is a falcon god bearing a sun disc and uraeus cobra on his head and carrying a serpent staff (Budge 1969:250). Budge does not specify who this deity is but it may be Horus.

7.3.3 Jewellery

Jewellery forms part of an important group of amulets used for protection, for both the living and the dead. Pinch (2006:105) says that most Egyptian jewellery had an amulet function. Jewellery was therefore not only for decorative purposes. It served an important function within the realm of apotropaic magic. Naturally the category of jewellery in the ancient world is a vast one. It is only possible to discuss a few examples in this dissertation. The uraeus cobra appears in so much ancient Egyptian jewellery across the various time periods. Examples are numerous and are found in jewellery forms such as pectoral, earrings and necklaces. Below are a few interesting examples.

7.3.3.1 Egyptian child's band

A circular band made of silver and gold was designed as an amulet to place around a child's neck. It dates to the early part of the 2nd millennium BCE (2000 – 1800 BCE). Various creatures such as snakes, hawks, hares, baboons and turtles decorate the band. According to Pinch (2006:116) it was probably intended to place the child within a protective sphere.

²⁰⁹ Budge (1969:250).

7.3.3.2 *Weret Hekau pendant*

A pendant found in the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun depicts the cobra goddess of magic, Weret Hekau, suckling the young king (Pinch 2006:83).

7.3.4 **Myths and legends**

7.3.4.1 *The legend of the destruction of humankind*

There is an ancient Egyptian legend called '*The destruction of mankind by Ra*' (Budge 1972:466). The bulk of the myth telling of the destruction of humankind is irrelevant here with the exception of the tail end of it. Here Ra instructs Geb, the god of the earth, to protect and care for the serpents of the earth (Budge 1972:467). This is most likely because the ancient Egyptians believed that within snakes and serpents lived the souls of the deities.²¹⁰ When the text containing this myth was recited by the priest-magician he had to recite and perform a spell presumably to give him power, life and protection in the underworld. One of the specific acts to accompany this spell involved the making of a female figure on which was painted a goddess with a serpent 'standing on its tail' (Budge 1972:467). There is obviously a valid reason for snakes needing to be protected. Apart from the reason mentioned by Budge in that the souls of the deities lived in snakes, I would assume that the snake held a place of value in terms of healing and protection, and also in disposing of rodents that would consume grain supplies.

7.3.4.2 *Kishar – the boundary serpent*

The Egyptian creator god Atum appears in the Pyramid Texts explaining how he coiled around himself to encircle what had been created. In this form he is Kishar (Wakeman 1973:20), the serpent that forms the protective boundary between order (creation) and chaos. In another version of this myth Kishar is Sito who encircles creation (Wakeman 1973:22). Rundle Clarke (1959:240) also refers to Sito who protects creation from negative forces.

²¹⁰ As an example, Amun is often depicted in the books of the underworld holding a serpent-headed sceptre. This sceptre, Budge (1972:166) believes, was originally a fetish and represents Kam-at-f who was supposed to 'enshrine' the real soul of Amun.

7.3.5 Protection of places

The people of the ancient Near East protected not only themselves but also places such as dwellings, temples, granaries and tombs. It was believed that these places needed protecting from evil spirits which often brought illness. Granaries in particular needed protection from rodents which would enter and ruin the stored grain. It was believed that the use of serpent imagery could protect these important places.

7.3.5.1 Early Egyptian temples

According to Mundkur (1983:102) early temples in ancient Egypt each had their own protective serpent. This evidence comes from lists of temples from the later Ptolemaic period which Mundkur (1983:102) says continued traditions of the earlier periods.

7.3.5.2 Mesopotamian temples

There were two temples dedicated to serpent gods in ancient Mesopotamia. One was for the god Ninazu at Enegi, and the other was dedicated to Ningizzida at Gišbanda (Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey 1985:7-8). Van Buren (in McDonald 1989:34) believed that Ningizzida and *mušhuššu* were believed to be guardians of the sanctuary. Presumably this would be at temples during the reign of King Gudea of Lagaš.

7.3.5.3 Gate guardians of the Egyptian underworld

The divisions in the ancient Egyptian underworld are separated from each other by gates. Each gate in the *Book of Gates*²¹¹ is guarded by a protective serpent (Budge 1972:368).

²¹¹ The *Book of gates* was a funerary text found predominantly on the walls of 19th Dynasty royal tombs. The deceased was required to pass through 'gates' and the *Book of gates* served as a guidebook (Lesko 2003:145).

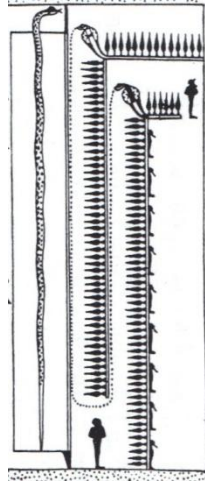


Figure 75: Serpent gate guardian²¹²

The serpent standing upon its tail in the image above is the guardian of the gate that divides two hours (or divisions) of the night from each other in the Egyptian underworld. Two cobras that spit fire can be seen on the right hand side of the picture and they provide protection in the hour on the other side of the gate, specifically protecting the corridors (Budge 1969:182).

7.3.5.4 Mesopotamian house amulets

Budge (1978:82) informs us that the Sumerians and Babylonians feared evil spirits and that charms, spells and incantations were used to protect themselves. The people of Mesopotamia protected not only themselves but their dwellings by interring clay figurines in the house walls or beneath the foundations (Budge 1978:82).

Budge (1978:97) describes a plaque amulet intended to protect a house. The deities Marduk, Ištar and Nabu, all of whom have serpent connections, are represented on the plaque. Marduk and Nabu stand upon 'magical beasts'. On examining a picture of the plaque (Budge 1978:98) these 'magical beasts' can be identified as the serpent dragon Bašmu or the *mušhuššu* dragon. The depiction of the deities appears in the upper register whilst script occupies the lower register.

A number of prophylactic figurines was found at Ur amongst the ruins of a building, says Budge (1978:99). Found by Sir Leonard Woolley, they too date to the mid-7th century BCE. Although outside the scope of this study, in terms of time period, they

²¹² Budge (1969:183).

are interesting in concept as the same concept would apply to earlier artefacts of this nature, to my mind. One of these was the *mušhuššu* which could be buried under floors or attached to walls to prevent evil and sickness from entering a house (Budge 1978:101-102). I think that the primary function of protection of the house from negative entities provides a secondary function – that of preventing illness and thereby protecting the individuals within the dwelling. This same concept would surely be applied to the earlier artefacts of a similar nature.

7.3.5.5 Egyptian serpent nome

Utterance or spell 436 of the Pyramid Texts contains the following line: ‘May you ferry over by means of the Great Bull, the Pillar of the Serpent–Nome, to the Fields of Re which he loves’ (Faulkner 1969:143). There is also a *hpiw*-snake which resides over On, as mentioned in utterance 675 (Faulkner 1969:289).

7.3.5.6 Syro-Palestinian ‘snake houses’ and temple protectors

Charlesworth (2010:70) explains that two artefacts found at Hazor are deemed to possibly be ‘snake houses’ by archaeologists, and that similar finds come from Dan²¹³ and Ugarit. The artefacts are shaped like houses or temples with an opening that may have been covered with some kind of material to allow in air for the snake to breathe. From Tel Kinrot on the Sea of Galilee’s north-western side comes an early Iron Age fenestrated vessel. It has a handle on either side and in the middle of the vessel is a rectangular opening. It is compared to similar Syro-Palestinian vessels believed to have housed snakes (Nissinen & Münger 2009:135). The discovery of these artefacts adds to evidence of the existence of a Syro-Palestinian snake cult. Yadin (1975:90) also comments on one of these vessels found at Hazor in an area H temple, saying that he believes that the holy temple snakes may have been kept in them.

It is possible that a U-shaped serpent found at Beth-Shan was used to guard the temple entrance. Charlesworth (2010:74) arrives at this conclusion by analogy with the Egyptian pyramid texts. Indeed vignettes in the Old Kingdom tombs show serpents as guardians of doorways and corridors.

²¹³ The ‘snake house’ from Dan dates to around the 12th century BCE and comes from stratum V, room 7082 (Charlesworth 2010:7).

7.3.5.7 Protector of the tribes of Israel

Genesis 49:17 reads ‘Dan shall be a serpent on the way, an adder on the path, the one who bites the hoofs of the horse so that its rider falls backward’. Charlesworth (2010:231) believes that the city of Dan is likened to a serpent as the protector of the tribes of Israel.

7.3.5.8 The cobra frieze

The cobra frieze is an architectural feature of numerous Egyptian buildings and also appears on furniture. The frieze was probably intended to protect important buildings. The cobras are banded together and face outwards in order to protect the building from perceived negative entities.

The façade of the south tomb cult chapel in the mortuary complex of King Djoser (*ca* 2680 BCE) has a frieze of uraeus cobras along the top. Another example of the cobra frieze is found at the Luxor temple. A scene on the southern wall of the ‘hall of appearances’ shows the coronation scene of Amenophis III. Above the scene is a cobra frieze (Schulz & Sourouzian:1998:177).

Examples of the cobra friezes are found on tomb furniture. There are two rows of protective uraeus cobras on the canopic shrine of Tutankhamun. The king’s vital organs were contained within canopic jars within this shrine (Seidel 1998:236). There is also a row of uraeus cobras along the top of a throne of Tutankhamun (Seidel 1998:241). In the picture below the cobra frieze can clearly be seen below the Hathor-headed columns.



Figure 76: Cobra frieze, Temple of Isis, Agilkia Island in Aswan²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Photograph: Wendy Golding (2000), Aswan, Egypt.

7.3.5.9 Protective granary amulets

Mallowan in McDonald (1989:120) felt that snakes were tolerated and even venerated in domestic situations as they disposed of vermin such as rodents that would destroy the household grain supplies. As mentioned in 6.3.5 there were images of the Egyptian snake goddess Renenutet placed at granaries and also shrines erected in the harvest fields.

7.3.6 Protective serpent boat imagery

The god Nirah, ridden by the god Enki, is described as a serpent boat by Van Dijk, Goetze & Hussey (1985:8). The Mesopotamian serpent god Sirsir was a god of boatmen.

The Egyptian snake-scorpion goddess Selqet was depicted riding in protective serpent boat.



Figure 77: Selqet in her serpent boat²¹⁵

It can be noted that the image is similar to that of Isis nursing the young Horus. This probably indicates that Selqet filled a nurturing role.

7.3.7 Burial amulets

The deceased in ancient Egypt was protected by various deities and symbols. The way in which an amulet was positioned on the body of the deceased was important. It seems that amulets were placed in prescribed positions (Andrews 1994:7). I have used examples here from the burial of Tutankhamun.

²¹⁵ Budge (1972:97).

7.3.7.1 *Netjer-ankh amulets*

Images of the cobra deity Netjer-ankh were imposed on Egyptian coffins from the 2nd millennium BCE onwards, says Mundkur (1983:24). Actual gold amulets inscribed with this deity's name were found within Tutankhamun's mummy wrappings. Netjer-ankh was obviously believed to play an important role in protecting the deceased as these images and inscriptions occurred within burial contexts.

7.3.7.2 *Cobra goddess for the head*

From the Pyramid Texts²¹⁶ in the pyramid of king Unas (c.2375-2345 BCE) is part of a passage describing how the cobra goddess protects the king. It reads 'the cobra goddesses are on his skull, the cobra-guide-goddess is on his forehead' (Budge 1972:324). The positioning of the cobra goddesses in this text can be compared to the position of the cobra amulets found on the head of Tutankhamen's mummy from the New Kingdom period. It would therefore appear that placement of the cobra image on the head of the deceased was a long-standing practice.



Figure 78: Beaded cobras on the head of Tutankhamun's mummy²¹⁷

The four uraeus cobras on the skull cap of Tutankhamun were composed of glazed terracotta and gold beads (Desroches-Noblecourt 1967:224).

²¹⁶ The Pyramid Texts are magical spells that appear for the first time during the Old Kingdom period. They were found on tomb and pyramid interior walls. Their function was to aid the transition to the afterlife for the deceased (Oakes 2006:42).

²¹⁷ Desroches-Noblecourt (1963:224).

Andrews (1994:76) informs us that in the funerary context a uraeus was placed upon the forehead of the deceased. In the funerary context it symbolised resurrection. The uraeus amulet could also be placed upon the feet or torso of the mummy.

7.3.7.3 Wadjet and Nekhbet amulets

Nekhbet and Wadjet could appear together as the vulture and cobra respectively. They symbolised the protection of Upper and Lower Egypt (Andrews 1994:76). Amulets featuring this pair were considered to have high protective qualities and appeared together in non-royal burials from the First Intermediate Period onwards. In the burial of Tutankhamun these two protective deities were placed along the thighs and not within the mummy wrappings. The uraeus amulet was placed against the left leg (Desroches-Noblecourt 1967:225). The head of the king was protected by several layers of Wadjet and Nekhbet amulets and necklaces that were contained within the mummy wrappings.

7.3.7.4 Spell and ritual from the 'Book of the Heavenly Cow'

The *Book of the Heavenly Cow* is a funerary text with its earliest known version coming from the tomb of Tutankhamun, and therefore the New Kingdom period. It contains magic spells for the well-being of the deceased (Roth: 2003:145). A scene in this funerary text incorporates the arrival of the earth god Geb along with snakes and therefore the 'need for magic spells to protect against them' (Roth 2003:146).

7.3.7.5 A tomb curse

An ancient Egyptian tomb belonging to two dentists, dating back to the 5th Dynasty contained a curse to protect the grave goods of the deceased occupants. The curse threatened that any tomb robbers would be consumed by a snake and a crocodile (Lovgren 2006:1).

7.3.8 Spells and incantations: the Pyramid Texts

The late 5th Dynasty king Unas and the kings of the 6th Dynasty had magical 'utterances' and formulae inscribed into the walls of their pyramids. These have become known as the Pyramid Texts (Faulkner 1969:v). In some of these utterances

the serpent is referred to as ‘magic’ which cements the relationship between the serpent and magic.

7.3.8.1 The protective uraeus crown in the Pyramid Texts

Utterances 220 and 221 of the Pyramid Texts are part of a ritual related to the crown of Lower Egypt. Faulkner (1969:48) explains that the first part of these utterances relates to the opening of the shrine in which the crown is located and a priest addresses the crown which is perceived to be a goddess. The priest says: ‘He (the king) has come to you, O Nt-crown; he has come to you, O Fiery Serpent; he has come to you, O Great One; he has come to you, O Great of Magic, being pure for you and fearing you’ (Faulkner 1969:48). It is clear from the priest’s address that epithets such as ‘Fiery Serpent’ and ‘Great of Magic’ are associated with the crown. Serpent and magic are therefore linked in this context. The king has purified himself and fears the crown, saying: ‘Ho crown of Great Magic! Ho Fiery Serpent! Grant that the dread of me be like the dread of you; grant that the fear of me be like the fear of you’ (Faulkner 1969:49). In this the king reiterates the link between serpent and magic. He acknowledges fear of the serpent and implies that the reverence shown by himself to the serpent of the crown will be shown by others towards himself as the wearer of the crown. In this manner the king believes that the serpent of the crown will provide protection for him against his enemies.

Utterance 256 contains more evidence of the perceived protective qualities of the crown. The king says:

I have succeeded to Geb, I have succeeded to Geb; I have succeeded to Atum, I am on the throne of Horus the first born; and his Eye is my strength, I am protected from what was done against him, the flaming blast of my uraeus is that of Ernutet who is upon me (Faulkner 1969:66).

Ernutet is the cobra goddess in the king’s crown in this instance. The uraeus in the crown provides protection for the king.

Use of the serpent to protect the king is also found in utterance 260 where the king says: ‘O you southern, northern, western and eastern gods, honour me and fear me, for I have seated myself in the awning [?] of the Two Courtyards, and that fiery snake the *dnn*-serpent would have burnt you, striking to your hearts’ (Faulkner 1969:69). Again,

protection by the serpent is in evidence in utterance 273: ‘His uraei are on the crown of his head, the king’s guiding-serpent is on his brow’ (Faulkner 1969:80).

The perceived fear of the royal crown is well illustrated in utterance 468 as follows:

O king, the dread of you is in the intact Eye of Horus, (namely) the White Crown, the serpent goddess who is in Nekheb; may she set the dread of you, O king, in the eyes of all the gods, in the eyes of the spirits of the Imperishable Stars, and those whose seats are hidden; in the eyes of everything which shall see you and shall hear your name (Faulkner 1969: 157).

Further evidence for the role of the uraeus cobra as a protector comes from a New Year festival to celebrate the birth of the sun god Re. The following is quoted from Ritner (1990:35):

May you come to the living image; may you protect him from the slaughtering demons who are behind you and before you. No evil breath shall come against him. No fever shall fell him at any time of this year. May you mount up to him in that name of yours “uraeus”; may you protect him in that name of yours ‘protector’.

7.3.9 Serpent vessels

It would appear that the function of serpents decorating Syro-Palestinian vessels may have been one of protection of the vessel contents. Charlesworth (2010:63) believes that a Middle Bronze Age vase found at Jericho symbolised protection of the contents of the vase. The vase was decorated with a bird and two snakes. The reason for appealing to the snakes for protection of the contents was possibly to prevent sickness that may arise from the contents perishing due to lack of refrigeration facilities. The serpent was therefore perceived of as a preserver and protector of health.

Similarly Charlesworth (2010:64) believes a Canaanite storage jar from Ashkelon dating to approximately 1800 BCE was decorated with serpents in order to protect the oil or wine that was contained in it. Macalister (in Charlesworth 2010:67) believes an ornamental object found at Gezer, dating to pre-1400 BCE, may have had a use as an amulet to protect against snake bite. Another vessel with a serpent apparently protecting its contents was found at Hazor (Charlesworth 2010:69).

7.4 CONCLUSION

The topic of protective amulets is a vast one. Even within the realm of the serpent, particularly with regards to ancient Egypt, it is fairly extensive. What I have endeavoured to do in this Chapter is to show the variety of amulet forms in apotropaic magic that incorporates the snake.

What is obvious is that protective amulets were used in two distinct ways. Firstly they were used to protect people and places from snakes. Secondly the snake was used to provide protection. In the first category I have shown that sympathetic magic was often used to protect against snake bite or to protect against the snake entering a building.

An abundance of information comes from ancient Egypt, less from Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. Nevertheless the information from these latter two regions provides valuable insight. The perception of the dual role of the serpent, namely the good serpent and the bad serpent, is apparent in the realm of protective magic.

7.4.1 Protection against the serpent

Numerous forms of protective amulets were used with the intent of protecting people and places from snakes. These forms include: incantations, invocations and magic spells, mortuary texts and vignettes, specific amulet objects, imagery of protective serpent boats and animals, and myths and legends.

7.4.1.1 The written word

Texts incorporating magic to protect against serpents come from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. Although in written form there were no doubt sections that were spoken or chanted to provide protection. Magic spells often went hand in hand with some form of ritual activity. For example: the destruction of wax effigies of the Egyptian Apophis. Other examples include the actions of a snake charmer, or the placement of figurines at specific locations within a room. Myths and legends incorporating protection from the serpents of chaos come from all three areas.

7.4.1.2 Egyptian burial protection

The predominance of Egyptian mortuary magic incorporating protection from snakes over that of other cultures may be explained by two possible factors. Firstly the Egyptians had a strong belief in the afterlife and were obsessed with it. Secondly the chaotic serpent occurred not as an obstacle in creation mythology but rather as an obstacle to the passage of the deceased to the afterlife. Protection of the deceased from the perceived intention of biological snakes to devour the corpse to the dangers posed by mythological Apophis and his evil serpentine hoard resulted in a wealth of mortuary amulets. These amulets include magic spells and vignettes on tomb walls as well as amulet pieces and jewellery incorporated into the burial with the mummy. Serpent boats demonstrate the use of sympathetic magic to protect the sun god Re from evil.

7.4.1.3 Protective artefacts

There are many items that served to protect the individual from snakes. I have tried to select interesting examples to illustrate the perceived need for protection. These examples show that people from Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine all felt the need to utilise apotropaic magic for protection. It was a 'universal' need in terms of the ancient Near East. Many of these examples incorporate the use of sympathetic magic. Amulets include ivory wands, pendant amulets, figurines, *cippi* and furniture items. Most interesting are the Nami, Beth Shan and Amarna suspension amulets which may have been used on priests' garments. This suggests these priests may have handled snakes for cultic purposes.

7.4.2 Using the serpent as an agent of protection

The snake was used in apotropaic magic to provide protection from enemy and negative entities such as demons and ghosts.

7.4.2.1 Protective items

Just as there was an array of amulet objects to protect against the serpent, so there were amulets that incorporated serpent imagery to provide protection against non-serpentine entities. In ancient Egypt the uraeus cobra dominates the protective imagery especially with regards to royalty. The deities Wadjet, Nekhbet and

Nehebkhou feature prominently in amulet items for the living and the dead. From both Egypt and Syria-Palestine come standards bearing serpent motifs. The Mesopotamians produced votive seals and *kudurrus* with serpent imagery. Serpent figurines provided protection in homes. The magician's staff was an important tool with serpent connections.

7.4.2.2 Jewellery

I was able to find jewellery incorporating serpent imagery from ancient Egypt but not from Mesopotamia or Syria-Palestine. This may indicate that the use of the serpent as a protective amulet was much stronger in Egypt than in Mesopotamia or Syria-Palestine. Although I have only included a few examples, there is much in the way of Egyptian jewellery that incorporates the cobra in particular.

7.4.2.3 Protection of places

Serpent iconography was used in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine to protect temples and dwellings. In Egypt it was used to protect granaries and food supplies from rodents. Protective serpents were utilised in underworld representations. In Egypt and Syria-Palestine the serpent was the totem animal and protector of certain towns.

It is clear from the examples utilised in this chapter that people employed apotropaic magic to protect against the serpent and also incorporated the serpent into amulets of protection.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

8.1 MAGIC

Magic, religion and healing in the ancient Near East were interlinked. They were an integral part of the daily lives of ancient people. These elements functioned in conjunction with each other rather than in opposition. This is particularly clear in Chapter Five which shows the roles played by the serpent in healing, and in Chapter Seven which shows the incorporation of magic into protective devices. Treatment was aimed at mind and body, which is a holistic approach.

8.1.1 Magic and amulets

Magic was of the divine realm. Many illnesses or inflictions were believed to have been sent by the gods. Therefore use of magic to resolve issues was logical. The employment of magic for protection or healing involved the use of amulets. Amulets could be objects or they could be the written or spoken word, or even illustrations or images. As we have seen from Chapters Five and Seven, the serpent played a role in the employment of amulets. These were amulets to provide healing from a snake bite or to protect the individual from being bitten. There were also amulets that incorporated the serpent in a positive role in the protection and healing regimes.

8.1.2 Serpent personnel

Use of magic to protect or heal individuals with regards to snakes resulted in specialised personnel in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. There were snake specialist exorcists, charmers, priests and healers. These people dealt with ophidian issues from medical, magical and religious perspectives. This is testimony to the roles, both negative and positive, played by the snake in the lives of the people.

In ancient Egypt the specialist priest-magician healers were known as the ‘Controllers of Selqet’. Specialist snake charmers existed in Mesopotamia and were called *muš-la-*

la-ah-hu, *nigru* or *mušlah*. These words appear synonymous with *āšipu* and *mašmaššu*, indicating that they were priests and exorcists who specialised in dealing with snake issues. The Syro-Palestinian magician, the '*ḥakam*', may well have been a snake specialist as it was believed that the '*ḥakam*' could turn rods into snakes. The Levites may possibly have been members of a snake tribe with a tribal god named Nahash and were probably medicine men. Evidence for the presence of snake charmers at Ugarit is found in Ugaritic incantations. It is also found in the Hebrew Bible. The references suggest that snake charming amongst the Canaanites was normal practice. The possibility exists that in Syria-Palestine there were also priests who handled snakes. With regards to snake cults certain snake deities in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt can be named, whilst the Canaanite snake deity remains nameless. In each region there were therefore snake specialists who dealt with ophidian matters on medical, magical or religious levels.

8.2 FEAR OF THE SNAKE

Fear of the snake resulted in it playing a negative role in the lives of the ancient Near Easterners. The reasons for this are more than likely linked to the painful and often fatal results of an envenomed snake bite. As mythology played an important role in people's lives so the serpent became an ideal candidate to represent disorder and negative elements in the myths of all three regions. It played a role as a threat to order on a cosmic level and to life itself on an individual plane. Observation of biological aberrations in snakes led to the depiction of serpent hybrids, monstrous creatures that threatened order. One can understand why ancient humankind felt the need to provide protection for themselves from the biological and mythological serpent.

In ancient Egypt there are numerous examples of serpent monsters – hybridised snakes with legs or multiple heads, sometimes combined with human features, which populated the Egyptian underworld. They threatened the deceased and the safe passage of the sun god Re. The Mesopotamians also created serpent monsters.

The frightening effects of an envenomed snake bite fuelled ancient humankind's fear of snakes. They did not have access to the medical facilities and knowledge of today's

world. Generally prognosis for an individual suffering from an envenomed snake bite must have been poor.

Ancient humankind had the ability to distinguish between different species of snakes. Mesopotamian and Israelites at the very least distinguished between vipers and cobras based on behavioural differences – they recognised that a cobra could be ‘conjured’ whilst a viper or adder could not. The best evidence, in my opinion, for the ability to differentiate between species and even provide a prognosis for bites of the various species comes from the Egyptian *Brooklyn Papyrus*.

8.2.1 The snake as a threat to order and life

So the venomous snake which posed a threat to the life of the individual also posed a threat on a mythological level to the order and existence of the universe and the environment around the individual. The serpent became representative of chaos in the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia there was Tiamat and her brood of monsters. In the Syro-Palestinian context, chaos was represented by serpent monsters of the deep such as Leviathan, Rahab, Tannin and Yam. In ancient Egypt disorder is represented by Apophis. He occupies the underworld along with his hoard of serpentine monsters.

It has been shown in Chapter Three that the serpent was used to represent chaos in the ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Only one of these serpent monsters was of the feminine gender – the Mesopotamian Tiamat. The Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian serpent monsters are all associated with oceanic water whilst the Egyptian serpent demons were associated with the underworld primarily but also had associations with water. Only Tiamat and Yam were actually deified and only Apophis and Seth were demonised. All except Seth were deemed to be monsters.

8.2.2 The snake as a threat to health

In addition to affecting the world around the individual, the snake could affect the health of the individual. This affect on health was not necessarily from snake bite. Many deities with snake aspects or associations had a dual nature. Not only were they

perceived to bring ill health but many traumas or illnesses that could result in death. They were the very same deities that were appealed to for alleviation of suffering and therefore healing. It is in Mesopotamia that the serpent deity is most linked to adverse health. No references were found pertaining to serpent deities in Egypt or Syria-Palestine functioning in the same capacity, except Isis. In ancient Egypt it was believed that snakes, both live and mythological, could threaten the deceased.

8.3 POSTIVE PERCEPTIONS

Observations of the snake also linked it to aspects of its nature that resulted in positive perceptions. Foremost of these observations was the snake's ability to shed its skin. The old, dull skin is sloughed away to reveal the shiny, new exterior. Through this action one can understand how it became a creature associated with rejuvenation and renewal of health. This positive association resulted in the serpent being deified in some instances. In other instances certain deities linked to healing had serpent aspects or associations.

8.3.1 The healing serpent

It was shown in Chapter Four that deified serpents are predominantly male when linked to healing, whilst healing deities with serpent aspects or associations are more likely to be female. Healing gods tend to embody the serpent and healing or nurturing goddesses tend to have a serpent aspect or symbol. In Mesopotamia a large number of the serpent healing deities was shown to have a dual nature. In other words they had healing and chaos-causing functions. This is probably due to the belief that disease and misfortune were bestowed upon the individual by the gods. This seems to well illustrate the dual role of the snake. In all three regions the serpent gods in Chapter Four seem to have a strong link to magic.

The origins of the caduceus and modern day medical symbol go much further back than the Greek god of healing Asclepius. The origins may well be with the Sumerians who used the tree root sign called *arina*. *Arina* was composed of two crossed symbols for the serpent and this appears to be the earliest form of the caduceus. The influences from Mesopotamia could have travelled to Syria-Palestine where they influenced the

concept of Nehuštan. From there the symbol would have passed to the Greeks to produce the Asclepian symbol with which we are familiar.

There are a number of serpent deities, and deities with serpent aspects and associations, associated with healing and well-being across Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and ancient Egypt. The link between healing and the serpent is therefore not associated with just one region but is a phenomenon that occurs across all three regions.

I endeavoured to form a generic Syro-Palestinian goddess and named her 'Elat after the goddess mentioned by Wilson (2001:97). Through this I have attempted to show how the Biblical Eve may possibly have originally been a serpent and healing goddess to the Canaanites.

In Mesopotamia healing serpents and serpent hybrids linked to healing are male and deified. The healing goddesses in Table 6 (4.2.14) rather have serpent associations. It may be that their serpent symbols are remnants of their original serpent forms. In ancient Egypt it appears that only female serpent deities are linked to healing. The Egyptian healing goddesses associated with serpents do not appear to have chthonic, vegetative or agricultural associations. Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine have more serpent deities, and those with serpent aspects or associations, linked to healing than ancient Egypt. The Mesopotamian goddesses Inanna and Ištar and the Egyptian Isis seem to use the caduceus staff as a symbol. The Madonna suckling the infant with serpent connections seems to be a fairly old theme and is seen as early as the Ur figurine (cf 4.3.1) and also with representations of Isis and Renenutet.

Certain Mesopotamian serpent deities, and those with aspects and associations, have a dual nature – as already mentioned. They are linked to ill health in addition to their healing role. This same phenomenon does not appear true of ancient Egyptian or Syro-Palestinian deities in the same category, with the exception of Isis.

Mesopotamian healing serpent deities and hybrids that have a chthonic nature tend to have vegetative or agricultural associations. The shedding of the snake's skin can be likened to the vegetation's shedding of leaves. The snake's shiny new exterior can

perhaps be compared to vegetative regrowth. The snake therefore is an apt representative of renewal of life and good health.

It is interesting to note that in Mesopotamia there appear to be healing serpent families. This same factor does not appear amongst the healing serpents of ancient Egypt or Syria-Palestine.

In Syria-Palestine the goddesses in this study linked to healing all have serpent associations. The only male deity is Resheph. The gender of Nehuštān is unclear. None of them have definite chthonic associations and there are very few agricultural or vegetative links. Generally – when comparing all three regions – it seems that healing deities of the male gender are serpent gods, whilst the healing goddesses are more likely to have a serpent association than to be a fully-fledged serpent goddess.

8.4 THE ROLE OF THE SERPENT IN HEALING

The placement of the snake within the realm of healing occurred on two distinct levels. Firstly there was the need to provide healing and alleviation of suffering from snake bite. Secondly there was the incorporation of the snake into the healing regime. The incorporation of the snake could involve use of snake body parts (blood, fat, skin, flesh etc.) or involvement on a magical and psychological level. The incorporation into the healing regime could be for the treating of any kind of ailment – not just snake bite.

Examples of treatments included in Chapter Five clearly show that treatments for snake bite involved magic, medicine and religion working hand in hand with each other to provide a holistic solution. Treatments for snake bites therefore occurred on a physical and psychological level. Treatment on a physical level was aimed at treating the bite wound. Treatment on a psychological level employed the use of magic. Incantations probably eased the mind of the sufferer whilst they were used in an attempt to harness the assistance of the gods. Exorcism was used to try to rid the body of the venom which was identified as an entity that caused suffering. External treatment of wounds very often involved poultices and bandaging with a variety of substances of vegetable, mineral and animal origin.

Various types of amulets were used in healing. Of importance was the spoken word which emerged in the form of prayers, incantations, invocations and spells. The spoken word also appeared in written format on statues, stelae, *cippi* and other types of amulets. Most important in ancient Egypt was the manual of the priests of Selqet (the *Brooklyn Papyrus*) which clearly demonstrates the use of magic and medicine in conjunction with each other. It is apparent that this same use of magic and medicine also occurred in Mesopotamia. Because information from Syria-Palestine is not always as forthcoming, it is difficult to gauge but it seems likely that snake bites were also treated on both physical and psychological levels. Exorcisms appear to have taken place in all three regions as part of the curative solution to snake bite.

The snake also fulfilled a positive role in healing. It would appear that there was some kind of healing connection between snakes and water sources such as springs and cisterns. Water was purified by the snake gods of healing and magic, Ea and Marduk. The Egyptian nurturing goddesses Isis and Renenutet came from the Delta marshes. In Syria-Palestine were the 'Ain Rogel spring and the also the cisterns in Bethesda where serpent motif vessels were found.

Serpent deities, or deities with serpent aspects and associations, were called upon in invocations and mythological recitations and legends to help sufferers. They were also incorporated into spells and incantations. Appeals to and use of serpent deities in this regard is particularly apparent in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt.

There were a number of snake-motif artefacts that seems to have been associated with healing. Specific examples have been included in Chapter Five. Perhaps the most notable is the magician's staff that very often had a serpent design. Also notable is the bronze serpent of Moses. The staff appears to have become a symbol of healing when linked with serpents. Examples are Nehuštan, Ningizzida entwined around the axial rod and the serpent staff of the Greek Asclepius. Of course the modern day medical symbol is a reflection of these ancient associations – and what better testament to the snake's link to healing than that!

Snakes found their way into medicinal compounds. The possible origin of theriac (viper wine remedy) in Mesopotamian times seems plausible. There is enough evidence, particularly from Mesopotamia, to link serpents, wine and healing together.

Some potions that incorporated snake parts and other unsavoury ingredients may have been intended to repulse the sickness-causing demons rather than to provide medicinal benefit to the patient. Benefit would follow from the exorcising of the sickness demon. This concept appears to have been employed by both the Mesopotamians and the ancient Egyptians.

Certain temples in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt were linked to serpent deities. It is highly likely, based on bronze serpent artefacts found in Bronze Age Canaanite sacred precincts, that something similar existed in Syria-Palestine as well. We know, according to the Biblical sources, that a bronze serpent existed in the Temple at Jerusalem.

8.5 THE PROTECTIVE SERPENT DEITIES

Ancient humankind believed that the very aspects of the snake which they feared could be harnessed via magic and put to good use. Thus came to life the serpent as a protective figure. Protective serpent deities emerged, most notably the uraeus cobra in the royal Egyptian crown. It is apparent that serpent deities and deities with serpent aspects and associations protected either person or place (and by extension, the persons within the place). The Mesopotamian serpent deities predominantly protected places such as dwellings and temples, whilst the Egyptian protective serpent deities were chiefly protectors of person.

Mesopotamian serpent deities were very much guardians of place. These places include dwellings, temples, the gates of heaven and the underworld. A number of Mesopotamian healing deities were also protective deities. Whilst Egyptian serpent deities protected place, they were predominantly protectors of person.

Both the Mesopotamians and the ancient Egyptians had protective serpent deities that functioned as boats. In addition both regions had a universal protective serpent. Earth was protected from external chaos and disorder.

Protective serpents in Mesopotamia are predominantly male whilst there is an even mix of genders in ancient Egypt. There is a distinct lack of protective serpent figures in Syria-Palestine. It is possible that the Biblical *seraphim* were protective serpent figures and may have been influenced by Egyptian belief and iconography.

8.6 THE ROLE OF THE SNAKE IN PROTECTIVE DEVICES

The incorporation of the snake into protection is quite extensive. Protection of the living and the dead (in the case of the ancient Egyptians) was highly important. Protective amulets against the serpent are numerous and take the form of objects, texts, vignettes in Egyptian tombs, and mythology. The individual had to protect him or herself from being bitten. In addition the deceased had to be protected from being devoured by serpents. Employment of magic and associated amulets was of paramount importance. Much use was made of sympathetic magic – using snake to repel snake. The living of all three regions protected themselves and the ancient Egyptians had mortuary texts with spells and vignettes to save themselves from being devoured by live snakes and to provide protection from the chaotic serpent-demon, Apophis.

Equally as obvious as the need to protect oneself from serpent harm, was the harnessing of serpent power into protective amulets. The very qualities of the snake that were feared were put to good use. The snake was utilised in sympathetic magic in amulets and also to ward off non-serpentine negative entities. The positive use was incorporated into protection of person and place. The serpent symbol protected food storage places and harvest fields, as well as temples. The uraeus protected royalty, and was commonly found depicted in royal crowns and the head-dresses of deities.

The people of all three regions utilised spells and incantations to protect dwellings and temples from snakes. Spells and incantations were used to protect snake charmers in Ugarit and also the deceased in ancient Egypt. Amulets to protect the individual

from snakes existed in all three regions and came in a variety of forms: ivory wands, pendants for priests' garments, statuettes, snake figurines, snake-head amulets (sympathetic magic played a big role) and snake-motif headrests. Sympathetic magic abounds. A good example is found in Egyptian underworld imagery of protective serpent boats to transport the deceased in order to provide protection from the serpent demons. Much use was made of burial amulets in ancient Egypt to protect the individual from serpents. This same phenomenon is not seen in Mesopotamia or Syria-Palestine. Also peculiar to the ancient Egyptians are the protective animal images and incorporation of certain animals into incantations – animals which were known to kill snakes. In Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt certain ritual activities were performed to repel snakes, and myths and legends were designed to provide protection just through the mere telling of them.

Serpent symbolism was used to provide protection in two ways. Firstly the serpent was incorporated into sympathetic magic to protect the individual from snake bite or to prevent snakes from entering a building. In the ancient Egyptian underworld serpent imagery was used to provide protection from the serpent demons. Secondly the serpent image was incorporated into all manner of amulets to protect people and places from non-serpentine negative entities. Such amulets included jewellery, furniture decorations, architectural features, figurines, votive seals, and standards. In Mesopotamia serpent iconography appeared on *kudurrus*. They represented important snake deities and, in my opinion, served as protectors of the law. All manner of places such as tombs, dwellings, temples and granaries were protected by serpent symbolism.

8.7 IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have found that the discussion of the role of the serpent in apotropaic magic, as revealed through the mediums of healing and protection, show that it fulfilled opposing roles. The chaotic and mischievous serpent caused the need for protection and methods of healing. Fear of snake bite led to the need to provide protection for the individual and cast the snake in the role of villain on a mythological level. Snake bites led to the development of snake bite treatment methods. However, a

positive perception has also emerged. What was feared was utilised to provide protection. What caused harm could also be used to heal.

In the process of this dissertation I believe that I have uncovered many deified serpents and deities with serpent aspects and associations linked to apotropaic magic with regards to healing and protection. The objective was to have them all appearing in one place, such as in this work, which will prove useful. Humankind tends to have a negative perception of the snake. Hopefully this work goes some way to changing our modern day perceptions and enabling the positive role to be seen as well. It is clear that both roles played by the serpent were recognised by the people of the ancient Near East.

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