NERGAL AND THE BABYLONIAN CYCLOPS

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The cyclops or monoculus is not a regular feature of ancient Mesopotamian art. Isolated examples occur in scenes with wild animals on third-millennium cylinder seals (Porada 1976: figs. 14, 16, 18; Knox 1979). The most prominent example, however, appears on an early second-millennium clay plaque from the Larsa-period Sîn temple in Khafaje (Khafajah), ancient Tutub on the Diyala river just east of Baghdad. The plaque is now in the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago (Opificius 1990 pl. 62a). A cast or duplicate was formerly exhibited in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad (Basmachi 1975–76 fig. 109 bottom right). The scene moulded on the plaque depicts an execution (Fig. 1). On the right stands a monster, hands tied behind its back, and wearing a fleecy skirt but naked from the waist up. Its head is shaped like a twelve-pointed sun disk, though it is not clear that the flaring projections are solar rays. Most conspicuous is the single eye located centrally in its forehead. On the left a warrior god, bow slung over shoulder, with his left hand holds the captive down by one of the projections from his head, and with his right hand thrusts a blade into its stomach.

The identity of the god who slays the monoculus on the plaque has been uncertain. Henri Frankfort, who was director of the excavations at Khafaje and first published the plaque in the Illustrated London News (5 September 1936), described the scene as “God killing Cyclops” (1954: pl. 58a) and commented, “we do not know who was the destroyer of the fiery cyclops” (1954: 57). He had already proposed in 1936 that the slain being was a fire demon — on account of its (as he saw it) solar-rayed head — and identified it as the ancient Near Eastern precursor of the Cyclops of Greek mythology (Thomsen 1936–37: 265).

Other historians of ancient Mesopotamian art have not been more specific. André Parrot followed Frankfort (1960: 388): “god killing a Cyclops”, as did Seton Lloyd (1961: 138): “warrior or god destroying a fiery cyclops”. Ruth Opificius saw only a god killing a demon (1961: 136). Anton Moortgat identified the two combatants as a “god” and a “female demon” with a “Cyclops eye” (1969: 87 with pl. 211). Basmachi did not describe the plaque individually, but probably included it in his generic identification of “common mythological scenes such as contest[s] between deities of good and evil” (1975–76: 198). Delougaz and Holland’s catalogue of finds in the Sin temple at Khafaje booked it simply as a “plaque”, without further description (1990: 225 no. VI:81).

Few have ventured to be more specific. The archaeologist Yigael Yadin identified the scene as Marduk killing Tiamat, as described in the Babylonian poem of creation, Enûma eliš (1971: 83–84). R. Grafman (1972) followed him, rejecting any identification of the victim as a monoculus by interpreting the distinctive cranial feature as a “gaping wound on her forehead (and not a cyclopic eye)” (Grafman 1972: 47). Maureen Kaplan (1976) also supported Yadin’s position, but more importantly drew attention to a similar, but less clearly defined, scene on a mid-third-millennium seal now in the British Museum. Soon afterwards, the Assyriologist J. J. A. van Dijk used a photograph of the Khafaje plaque to introduce his edition of the Sumerian mythological narrative poem Lugale, and in the caption described the scene as Ninurta slaying the Asakku demon (van Dijk 1983/I: frontispiece: “La mise au mort de l’Asakku”; see also p. 23).

For want of supporting detail, neither identification, Marduk and Tiamat nor Ninurta and the Asakku, carried much conviction. The art historian Anthony Green rightly treated the latter with scepticism, invoking for cautionary effect the existence of mythologems in art for which no narrative counterpart has survived (1995: 1852–53: “god dispatching a solar-headed(?) cyclops”). He was right to do so.

The Akkadian term for monoculus was identified by René Labat as igidal/ru in his edition of the mid-third-millennium omen tablets from Susa (MDP 57 = Labat 1974: 210). The word occurs in two apodoses on birth-omen tablets, written i-gi-da-lu and i-gi-da-ru/lu! (MDP 57 nos. 9 obv. 12, 10 obv. 20). In both omens the word is a comment identifying by name a stillborn foetus (human or pig) reported in the prothesis as having a single eye on its forehead: igidal/ru šumšu “its name is I.” Labat saw that, in these circumstances, the strange new term igidal/ru must be a loanword from Sumerian i-gi.dili “one eye”. The signs lu and ru are very similar in the script of these tablets, and it is likely that i-gi-da-lu should be read in both instances.

Fig. 1. Clay plaque VI:81 from the Larsa-period Sin temple in Khafaje.
W. von Soden gave a cautious endorsement of Labat’s discovery in the additions to his monumental Akkadisches Handwörterbuch (1981: 1563 s.v. “igidålûlu” (Sum. Fw.?”) Stinnaugel?”). Nevertheless, an apparent problem remained with Labat’s derivation: Sumerian igi.dili “one eye” should convert to *igidilâšum > *igidilâš in Akkadian, and normally /Cû/ in Auslaut is spelled plene, Cu-i. In the light of this reconstructed form, a defective spelling i-gi-da-la appeared to be a serious obstacle to Labat’s etymology.

To these pictorial and linguistic data can now be brought a further piece of evidence. As we shall see, it will clarify the philology and the art, both providing the correct form of the Akkadian word for monoculus and identifying the god whose name it spells. Tablets of omens from a Babylonian diviners’ archive of the period of the First Sealand millennium seal (1976: 175 fig. 1), it is less certain that the figures on the plaque from Khafaje are to be identified as Nergal and the monoculus. Given the lack of detail on Kaplan’s third-millennium seal (1976: 175 fig. 1), it is clear on present knowledge that the figures on the plaque from Khafaje are to be identified as Nergal and the monoculus. The lack of plene spelling of the vowel in Auslaut is not, after all, an obstacle to Labat’s derivation from igi.dili. The Akkadian igitêlu “monoculus” was thus pronounced i-gi-da-la in Susa.

Turning now to the mythology, the Sealand-period tablet has revealed that Nergal killed a monoculus. While we do not know whether igitêlu designated a unique individual or a species of mythical being, henceforth I refer to Nergal’s victim as the monoculus, but it may have been one of many. As the violent and pitiless god of war and plague, Nergal is well suited to join the ranks of divine monster-slayers. Since he is the only deity known to have killed the monoculus, and so far no monoculus occurs in the company of any other deity, it is certain that the figures on the plaque from Khafaje are to be identified as Nergal and the monoculus. Given the lack of detail on Kaplan’s third-millennium seal (1976: 175 fig. 1), it is certain that the similar execution scene there also depicts Nergal and the monoculus.

Nergal’s slaying of the monoculus in mythology explains why in Old Babylonian birth omens he appears in an apodosis attached to the portent of a lamb’s foetus with an eye on its forehead (YOS X 56 i 36–37 // George forthcoming no. 11: 11): DIS iz-ça-um (…) i-in-šu i-na pu-ti-šu “nê-erîši, gal i-i(k)-ka-al ”(If) a stillborn foetus’s eye is on its forehead: Nergal (i.e. plague) will devour.” In divination, protases and apodases are linked by associations, hidden or overt. In this instance the association is overt: a foetus with the unique characteristic of the monoculus warned of death by plague, because in mythology the monoculus was slain by the plague-god Nergal.

To sum up, the divinatory passages adduced here allow advances in knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian religion, philology and art history. They (a) report a new episode of Babylonian mythology, in which Nergal killed the igitêlu, and (b) note a strong connection between Nergal and one-eyed foetuses; fact (b) arose from knowledge of mythologem (a). These two data confirm as correct Labat’s derivation (c) of i-gi-da-la at Susa from igti.dili “one eye”, and lead to the firm conclusion (d) that the scene on the clay plaque from Khafaje depicts Nergal in the act of executing the igitêlu “monoculus”.

The new knowledge has ramifications for wider history. While acknowledging the long gap in time between the monoculi on Mesopotamian cylinder seals and the Odyssey, Mary Knox was nevertheless inclined to suggest that Homer’s “Cyclops should join the rank of Greek monsters who have Oriental ancestry” (1979: 165). In discussing cultural relations between Greece and the ancient Near East, Martin West enlisted the monoculus-slaying scene on the Larsa-period plaque from Khafaje as further evidence for the cyclops in Mesopotamia (1997: 424), without indicating that it reduced the chronological gap by many centuries. The second millennium BC, from the Old Babylonian period to the Amarna age, was a time when Babylonian written culture and scholarship were being actively transmitted to Syria
and the east Mediterranean shore alongside the technology of cuneiform writing. The revelation by the Sealand-period omen tablet that a mythologem of Nergal and the monoculus informed Babylonian divinatory tradition at this very time of cultural transmission reduces even further the chronological gap acknowledged by Knox and magnifies the probability that the Greek Cyclops did indeed have a Babylonian ancestry.

References