

NERGAL AND THE BABYLONIAN CYCLOPS

A. R. GEORGE

The cyclops or monocolus 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 (Khafājah), ancient Tutub on the Diyala river just east of Baghdad. The plaque is now in the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago (Opificius 1961 no. 488, Delougaz and Holland 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.



Fig. 1. Clay plaque VI:81 from the Larsa-period Sîn temple in Khafaje.

The identity of the god who slays the monocolus 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 Sîn 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, *Enūma eliš* (1971: 83–84). R. Grafman (1972) followed him, rejecting any identification of the victim as a monocolus 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 monocolus was identified by René Labat as *igidal/ru* in his edition of the mid-second-millennium omen tablets from Susa (MDP 57 = Labat 1974: 210). The word occurs in two apodotes 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 protasis 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 *igi.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.

W. von Soden gave a cautious endorsement of Labat's discovery in the additions to his monumental *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (1981: 1563 s.v. "igid/tallu (Sum. Fw.?) Stirnauge?"). Nevertheless, an apparent problem remained with Labat's derivation: Sumerian igi.dili "one eye" should convert to *igidili'um > *igidilû in Akkadian, and normally /Cû/ in *Auslaut* is spelled *plene*, Cu-ú. In the light of this reconstructed form, a defective spelling *i-gi-da-lu* 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 monocus and identifying the god who in mythology slew one. Tablets of omens from a Babylonian diviners' archive of the period of the First Sealand dynasty (ca. sixteenth century BC), mostly now in a private collection, include a compendium of Akkadian gall-bladder omens. The text contains, against a protasis that is all but destroyed, the following apodosis (George Forthcoming no. 26 rev. 34'): *amût(ša.múd) ^dnè-eri₁₁-gal ša i-gi-te-la i-ni-ru* "liver-(omen) of the god Nergal, who slew *i-gi-te-la*". The reading of ša.múd as *amûtu* "liver" will be justified elsewhere. What interests us here is the *i-gi-te-la*.

This Sealand-period tablet, along with two others in the archive, was written by a scribe who had many idiosyncrasies. One of them was sometimes to defy the customary practice of writing *plene*, with CV-V, contracted and certain other long vowels of open syllables in *Auslaut*. He wrote CV instead:

George forthcoming no. 22 obv. 1 *mu-še* for *mušê*, rev. 16' *ru-ḥu* for *ruḥû*, rev. 30' [te]-e-šu for *tēšû*; ibid. No. 25 obv. 22', 23' *ik-ra* for *ikrâ*; ibid. no. 27: 10' *a-ša* for *ašâ*; 26'a, 26'b, 27'a *la-ra* for *larâ*; 27'a *tuk-ša* for *iršâ*.

Accordingly *i-gi-te-la* (ibid. no. 25 rev. 34') can denote *igitela* or *igitelâ*. The latter matches very nearly the reconstructed form *igidilû "monocus" < igi.dili, and the differences can be explained as routine: unvoicing of /d/ is to be expected in loans from Sumerian into Akkadian, and the lowering of /i/ to /e/ before /l/ is a well-known feature of Akkadian phonology. The apodosis thus announces that Nergal was known to have killed a (or the) monocus.

Study of the spelling of the omen tablets from Susa edited by Labat, and the contemporaneous omen tablets from Chogha Pahn and Haft Tepe, reveals many usages shared with the Sealand-period omen tablets. One of them is the very same practice of occasional defective writing in *Auslaut*, CV instead of CV-V:

MDP 57 no. 4 obv. 13, 14, 15 *la-ra* for *larâ*, 37 *sí-sí* for *sisê*, rev. 3 *ši* for *ši-i*, 25 *ru-bu* for *rubû*, 26 *nun-be* for *rubê*, 28 *te-šu* for *tēšû*, 38, 40 *a-lu* for *alû*; MDP 57 no. 5 obv. 10, 15 *te-še* for *tēšê*, rev. 9 *dáb-de* for *dabde*; MDP 57 no. 6 ii 21 *šu* instead of *šu-ú*, ii 27 *i-te* instead of *i-te-e*, iii 14 *a-pi-le* for *apillê*; MDP 57 no. 8 *passim* *šu* instead of *šu-ú*, obv. 13, 34, 36 *la-(aḥ)-ḥi* for *lahî*, obv. 20 *i-bi-is-sé* for *ibissê*, rev. 21 *i-bi-is-sú* for *ibissû*; MDP 57 no. 9 obv. 16 *bu-še* for *bušê*, rev. 19, 20 *dáb-du* for *dabdû*; MDP 57 no. 10 obv. 1 *šu* instead of *šu-ú*, rev. 16 *gál-ša* for *ibaššâ*, 22, 23 *dáb-de* for *dabde*; MDP 57 no. 11 iv 14', 24' *šu* instead of *šu-ú*;

Biggs and Stolper 1983: 156 obv. 3' *nun-bu i-ba.ug₇* for *rubû imât*;

Herrero and Glassner 1993: 129 obv. 21–26 *te-šu* for *tēšû*.

It is evident from these data that *i-gi-da-lu* in MDP 57 nos. 9 obv. 12 and 10 obv. 20 can stand for *igidalû*, just as *i-gi-te-la* in the Sealand-period tablet can stand for *igitelâ*. 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 *igitelû* "monocus" was thus pronounced *igidalû* in Susa.

Turning now to the mythology, the Sealand-period tablet has revealed that Nergal killed a monocus. While we do not know whether *igitelû* designated a unique individual or a species of mythical being, henceforth I refer to Nergal's victim as *the* monocus, 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 monocus, and so far no monocus occurs in the company of any other deity, it is clear on present knowledge that the figures on the plaque from Khafaje are to be identified as Nergal and the monocus. Given the lack of detail on Kaplan's third-millennium seal (1976: 175 fig. 1), it is less certain that the similar execution scene there also depicts Nergal and the monocus.

Nergal's slaying of the monocus 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): *DIŠ iz-bu-um (...) i-in-šu i-na pu-ti-šu ^dnè-eri₁₁-gal i-(ik)-ka-al* "(If) a stillborn foetus's eye is on its forehead: Nergal (i.e. plague) will devour." In divination, protases and apodoses are linked by associations, hidden or overt. In this instance the association is overt: a foetus with the unique characteristic of the monocus warned of death by plague, because in mythology the monocus 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 *igitelû*, 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-lu* at Susa from igi.dili "one eyed", and lead to the firm conclusion (d) that the scene on the clay plaque from Khafaje depicts Nergal in the act of executing the *igitelû* "monocus".

The new knowledge has ramifications for wider history. While acknowledging the long gap in time between the monocoli 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 monocus-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

- Basmachi, F. 1975–76. *Treasures of the Iraq Museum*. Baghdad
- Biggs, R. D. and M. W. Stolper 1983. A Babylonian omen text from Susiana. *Revue d'Assyriologie* 77: 155–62
- Daneshmand, P. 2004. An extispicy text from Haft-Tappe. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 56: 13–17
- Delougaz, P. and T. A. Holland 1990. Excavations at Khafājah Mounds B, C, and D. Pp. 207–35 and pls. 47–68 in H. D. Hill, T. Jacobsen and P. Delougaz, *Old Babylonian Public Buildings in the Diyala Region*. Oriental Institute Publications 98. Chicago, Ill.
- van Dijk, J. J. A. 1983. *Lugal ud me-lám-bi Nir-ĝál: le récit épique et didactique des travaux de Ninurta, de déluge et de la nouvelle création*. 2 vols. Leiden
- Frankfort, H. 1954. *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. Harmondsworth, Mddx.
- George, A. R. forthcoming. *Babylonian Divinatory Texts Chiefly in the Schøyen Collection*. Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 18. Bethesda, Md.
- Grafman, R. 1972. Bringing Tiamat to earth. *Israel Exploration Journal* 22: 47–49
- Green, A. 1995. Ancient Mesopotamian religious iconography. Pp. 1837–55 in Jack M. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. 4 vols. New York
- Herrero, P. and J.-J. Glassner 1993. Haft-Tépé: choix de textes III. *Iranica antiqua* 28: 97–135
- Kaplan, M. F. 1976. Another slaying of Tiamat? *Israel Exploration Journal* 76: 174–77
- Knox, M. 1979. Polyphemos and his Near Eastern relations. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 99: 164–65
- Labat, R. 1974. *Textes littéraires de Suse*, with a contribution by D. O. Edzard. Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique en Iran 57. Paris
- Lloyd, S. 1961. *The Art of the Ancient Near East*. London
- Moortgat, A. 1969. *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia*. London
- Parrot, A. 1960. *Sumer*. London
- Porada, E. 1976. Sumerian art in miniature. Pp. 107–18, 179–94 in D. Schmandt-Besserat (ed.), *The Legacy of Sumer*. Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 4. Malibu, Calif.
- Opificius, R. 1961. *Das altbabylonische Terrakottarelief*. Berlin
- von Soden, W. 1981. *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* 3. Š–Z, *Berichtigungen und Nachträge*. Wiesbaden
- Thomsen, P. 1936–37. Ausgrabungen und Forschungsreisen: Tell Asmar, Tell Agrab, Chafadsche, Aschdschali. *Archiv für Orientforschung* 11: 263–66
- West, M. L. 1997. *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*. Oxford
- Yadin, Y. 1971. A note on the scenes depicted on the 'Ain-Samiya cup. *Israel Exploration Journal* 21: 82–85