

The Lament of Lamaštu:
Biography of a Near Eastern Dark Goddess

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Black Madonnas
Dr. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum
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*You who are eternally the form of the whole world, at the time of creation you are the form of the creative force, at the time of preservation you are the form of the protective power, and at the time of the dissolution of the world, you are the form of the destructive power.*¹

Lamaštu... shhh ...even as her name is spoken we invoke her. You may hear her lamentation entwined with the howls of the wind. She is the demon who brings disease and the vampire who feasts upon your blood. She is the succubus who steals the nocturnal emissions of men spilling their seed on barren ground. Lamaštu is a hybrid *creatura*: part lioness, part raptor, and part ass.² Her enormous ears and teeth, her razor sharp talons and claws, her hairy body and scaly torso are heinous and horrifying. She rides a donkey on the boat that sails to and from the daemonic underworld. She gives succor to pigs and dogs and uses snakes in her sorcery. If Lamaštu descends upon your house it is as an unwelcome visitor.³ Exorcisms are performed, amulets are worn and plaques are hung to scare her away.⁴ Known as *Lilith*⁵ in the Old Testament, *Lamia*⁶ in Greek myth and *Lamatsu* in Akkadian lore, Lamaštu is devilry incarnate.

¹ Mookerjee, Ajit. *Kali: the feminine force*. S.l.: [s.n.], 1988, inside cover.

² Lamashtu (Mesopotamian demon) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia." Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/328457/Lamashtu> (accessed May 15, 2011).

³ Larrington, Carolyne. *The feminist companion to mythology*. London: Pandora Press, 1992, 85.

⁴ Budge, Ernest A. Wallis. "Chapter III. Babylonian and Assyrian Amulets.." In *Amulets and superstitions: the original texts with translations and descriptions ... With chapters on the evil eye Repr. d. Ausg.* London 1930. ed. New York: Dover Publ., 1978.

⁵ Lilith (Jewish folklore) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia." Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/341009/Lilith> (accessed May 15, 2011).

⁶ Lamia (Greek mythology) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia." Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/328706/Lamia> (accessed May 15, 2011).

This is the exploration of the myth of the dark goddess Lamaštu, whom to date history has been so unkind; her character contorted, demonized and conflated with every conceivable evil. Some of the oldest surviving cuneiform inscriptions of Lamashtu describe her as a protective sovereign goddess. Lamaštu's lament is that her mythos has suffered degradation concomitant with the rise of patriarchal monotheism. The aim of this paper is to elucidate Lamaštu's origins, symbols, and stories.

The etymology of Lamaštu is evocative of her status in the respective cultures from which her name derives. Lamaštu can be traced to the Akkadian (the first Semitic language) words *lamassu* or *lammar* and Sumerian *lamma* for "protective spirit."⁷ The Sumerian etymon is *dim-me* which means female spirit.⁸ In Greek Lamaštu is called Lamia (Λάμια) originating from the word *laimos* (λαιμός) which means gullet, in reference to her voracious appetite for unborn children.⁹ The English word lament- "sorrow, mourning and grief"¹⁰ is probably a derivative of Lamia, whose mythos evokes melancholia. Early translations of the Christian Bible substitute the lower case word *lamia* for screech owls, sea monsters and mermaids, compounding and inflating her monstrous persona.¹¹

The seed for this paper germinated in the spring of 2008. I dreamed that I was present to the universe as it was being birthed and could hear the fiery red orange

⁷ Beaulieu, Paul-Alain. The pantheon of Uruk during the neo-Babylonian period. googlebooks. Retrieved 9 December 2010 136-137.

⁸ Pinches, Theophilus Goldridge. "The religion of Babylonia and Assyria." Google Books. http://books.google.com/books?id=ZFoXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA109&dq=sumerian+dimme&hl=en&ei=uS_TTfudKoOssAOS_SlCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=sumerian%20dimme&f=false (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁹ Walker, Barbara. Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. New Jersey: Castle Books, 1996, 527. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=lamia&searchmode=none> (accessed May 17, 2011).

¹⁰ definition of lament from Oxford Dictionaries Online." Oxford Dictionaries Online - English Dictionary and Language Reference. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/lament> (accessed May 17, 2011).

¹¹ Walker, Barbara. Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. New Jersey: Castle Books, 1996, 527.

cosmic egg crackling and pulsing with vitality in the pitch black void. **SHAKTI** appeared in flaming letters across my mind's eye like sky writing. I had no prior knowledge of the word, so when I awoke I was intrigued to learn that the definition of Shakti is "power, force...feminine energy...the primal creative principal underlying the cosmos."¹² My prophetic dream was the first numinous call of the Dark Goddess to search for her.

The divine feminine¹³ was conspicuously absent in my Western philosophy courses which were taught by white men, about dead white men, and attended mostly by white men. The dearth of female philosophers, professors and sacred feminine icons propelled me to study multicultural spirituality of women with cultural historian Dr. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum in a class about the black madonnas, and other dark goddesses.¹⁴ In contrast to the white Madonna or goddess, "who may be said to embody church doctrine of obedience and patience" the pre-Christian Dark Goddess archetype represents "a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of a woman."¹⁵ Blackness, Birnbaum says is "the color of the earth and the ancient color of regeneration" with roots in the oldest religions known to humankind.¹⁶

In capitalizing Dark Goddess, I refer to the archetype, culturally rooted and isomorphic across temporal and geographical zones. The Dark Goddess represents wisdom, because to truly understand one must descend to the underworld and step into

¹² Mookerjee, Ajit. *Kali: the feminine force*. S.l.: [s.n.], 1988, 11.

¹³ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005, 8.

¹⁴ Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. *Black madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ "" 3

¹⁶ ""

the void of the unknown.¹⁷ The Dark Goddess is the sacred well, and to look into the face of the deep is to cross the threshold; to know the divine and to become as gods. She is the serpent offering wisdom in the apple's bite.

The process of unearthing the Dark Goddess¹⁸ began with my descent into the underworld of my unconscious mind¹⁹ to confront the feminine aspects of my shadow.²⁰ Although Jung used *feminine* to denote essentialist gender bound attributes, I employ a feminist Jungian definition of *feminine* as "the cultural conditioning of female characteristics as 'other' as historically conditioned and not necessarily located in those with female bodies."²¹ However when I refer to the "feminine" archetype, "androcentric shaping of the female image" is implied when using the term.²²

In feminist Jungian analysis of the psyche of the west, the dominant patriarchal collective conscious has vanquished unacceptable feminine archetypes to the collective unconscious.²³ Our patriarchal egos have slain the goddess in order to de-potentiate her fearsome power, but in so doing we have lost the ground of our being.²⁴ Dark goddesses under patriarchal domination became submerged in the collective

¹⁷ Matthews, Caitlin. *Sophia, goddess of wisdom: the divine feminine from black goddess to world-soul*. London: Mandala, an imprint of HarperCollins, 1991, 5.

¹⁸ Cordingly, David. *Seafaring women: adventures of pirate queens, female stowaways, and sailors' wives*. 2007 Random House Trade pbk. ed. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007, 113.

¹⁹ Perera, Sylvia Brinton. *Descent to the Goddess: a way of initiation for women*. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981.

²⁰ Murdock, Maureen. *The heroine's journey*. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala ;, 1990.

²¹ " " 39.

²² Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005, 8.

²³ Murdock, Maureen. *The heroine's journey*. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala ;, 1990

²⁴ Stone, Merlin. *When God was a woman*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

unconscious and projected as the shadow archetype, which became a cultural repository for misogyny passed down through myth.²⁵

A myth is a social mirror, reflecting the attitudes, customs and habits of the population.²⁶ With strong mnemonic properties, myths contain hidden codes that can best be deduced by employing a transdisciplinary approach.²⁷ In addition to feminist Jungian and Freudian depth psychological analysis, I have utilized archeomythology; a methodology incorporating but not limited to archaeology, anthropology, mythology, ethnology, folklore, linguistics, comparative religion, genetics, depth psychology, ecology, and history.²⁸ Myths express universal truths that transcend factual details, and they transmogrify with the tides of power. The pen might be mightier than the sword, but he who conquers with the sword avails himself of the pen to write HIStory. It is therefore necessary to employ a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion²⁹ in order to reevaluate ancient myths; deconstructing sexist, racist and classist bias in order to reveal subaltern³⁰ truths.

Restoring the suppressed and erased contributions of women and female deities to history books integrates the disowned parts of the world's soul so that they are not projected as shadow.³¹ Myths are the language of the collective conscious, the vast well

²⁵ Murdock, Maureen. *The heroine's journey*. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala ;, 1990

²⁶ Graves, Robert, and Raphael Patai. *Hebrew myths: the book of genesis*. New York: Greenwich House, 1983,

²⁷ Fox, Robin. *The challenge of anthropology: old encounters and new excursions*. New Brunswick: New Jersey. 1994.

²⁸ Marler, Joan. "The Institute of Archaeomythology." *The Institute of Archaeomythology*.

<http://www.archaeomythology.org/about/about.html> (accessed May 17, 2011).

²⁹ Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *The power of the word: Scripture and the rhetoric of empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

³⁰ Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. *Black madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.

³¹ Sharma, Arvind. *Methodology in religious studies the interface with women's studies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002

of archetypes from which humanity draws to create story.³² Thanks to the Freudian psychology myths are perceived as originating from our personal unconscious, rather than the external world as the ancients once believed. These ancient stories Jung describes as “eternal patterns of our soul”³³ conveyed rich material of the inner psychological landscape and the human condition. Before reading and writing, myth was the primary vehicle for cultural transmission passed down as oral history since time immemorial.

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum proposes that African immigrants traveling through sub-Saharan Africa dispersed Dark Goddess spirituality around the globe.³⁴ Birnbaum combined a subaltern cultural research methodology with feminist deasophical study to flesh out the submerged Dark Goddess in her ancestral homeland of Italy. Using Birnbaum’s cultural methodology, I began searching my own story for signs of the Dark Goddess. My ancestors³⁵ are of Near Eastern descent, so I researched the religious traditions of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.³⁶ I began by exploring Mesopotamian creation myths, and eventually came upon Lamaštu, arguably the most fearsome of all Near Eastern goddesses.

³² George, Demetra. *Mysteries of the dark moon: the healing power of the dark goddess*. San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

³³ Fox, Robin. *The challenge of anthropology: old encounters and new excursions*. New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.: Transaction, 1994.

³⁴ Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. *Black madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.

³⁵ Counting the Founders: The Matrilineal Genetic Ancestry of the Jewish Diaspora." National Center for Biotechnology Information. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2323359/> (accessed May 15, 2011).

³⁶ Logan, Jim and partners. "The Subclades of mtDNA Haplogroup J and Proposed Motifs for Assigning Control-Region Sequences into These Clades." *Journal of Genetic Genealogy*. <http://www.jogg.info/42/files/logan.htm> (accessed May 15, 2011).

My inquiry began with comparative exegetical study of three primary Near Eastern creation myths. Sumerian Enuma Elish, Hebrew Genesis, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead share parallels: the Dark Goddess was the primordial substrate out of which the cosmos sprang. Sumerians believed that the goddess *Tiamat* “Mother of Mothers” begat the first gods/goddesses, demigod/desses, daemons, humans, animals in descending order.³⁷ (Demons (from the Greek *daemon* meaning spirit) were complex supernatural entities that could cast blessings or curses upon the people).³⁸

Etymologically Tiamat derives from the Akkadian words *Ti* which means life and *Mat* which means mother. The following passage from describes how Tiamat produced the fertile cosmic soup from which the universe emerged.³⁹

*When on high were not raised the heavens
And also below on earth a plant had not grown up
The abyss had not broken its boundaries
The chaos Tiamat was the producing mother of all of them.*

The Lower Egyptian creation story begins:

***Only the ocean existed at first. Then Ra (the sun) came out of an egg
that appeared on the surface of the water.***

The Upper Egyptian myth names Nun as the Dark Goddess:

***At first there was only Nun, the primal ocean of chaos that contained
the beginnings of everything to come.***

³⁷ Bottéro, Jean. Religion in ancient Mesopotamia .Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 6.

³⁸ “ “ 64

³⁹ Pirani, Alix. The Absent mother: restoring the goddess to Judaism and Christianity. London: Mandala, 1991, 34.

In the next creation myth from the Hebrew Old Testament, Genesis 1:1-3, written approximately 400-300 BC⁴⁰ the male god Yaweh, is named as the creator of the universe. Although the Dark Goddess is not named in this English translation, Tehom, a masculinized variant of the Sumerian Tiamat was used to identify the Yaweh's co-creatrix in the original Hebrew verse. The Dark Goddess is *tohu bohu*; the pre-existing conditions necessary for the fertilization of the universe and is therefore *first cause*.⁴¹ Bohu incidentally hearkens back to Canaanite Baau, the "goddess of the primal night the mother of the first mortals."⁴²

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was **over the face of the deep**. And the Spirit of God was hovering over **the face of the waters**.*

Tehom is the face of the deep and the face of the waters; the **feminine** aspect of the divine who together with the masculine principle brought forth the cosmos. In each of these creation stories, the Dark Goddess is the watery chaotic abyss. Chaos is *mysterium tremendum*, the blood mysteries of life and death, the oceanic realm of the feminine. Tiamat was originally imagined as an undifferentiated oceanic mass, but later under the tarnishing influence of Platonic Gnostic *ex nihilo* philosophical prejudice that touted formlessness as evil, mutated into dragons, or sea monsters.

The agenda of patriarchal religious leadership influenced translation and interpretation of the text resulting in the extraction of her name. Removing Tehom's

⁴⁰Hannay, J. B.. Symbolism in relation to religion; or, Christianity: the sources of its teaching and symbolism.. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971.

⁴¹ Keller, Catherine. Face of the deep: a theology of becoming. London: Routledge, 2003, 183.

⁴² " "

name gave the impression that Yaweh created the cosmos out of nothingness. This stratified the universe into godly and formed or demonic and undifferentiated.⁴³ This gave rise to *tehomophobia*⁴⁴; the “othering” of the Dark Goddess, and conflation of women with the ocean, appearing in stories as nymphs, goddesses and sea monsters. Hurricanes were named after women until 1979; projecting an image of women as tempestuous sirens. To sail with women aboard a ship was long considered ill fated, because it angered the sea gods.⁴⁵ Women were tossed overboard as ritual sacrifice to propitiate the oceanic divinities. Mastheads of ships were carved in the shape of a bare breasted woman in order to “shame nature” into calm weather and smooth seas. Women, like the sea, were presumed to be emotionally volatile and dangerous; their blood cycles magically reverberating with the tides and moon. The dominant master narrative of patriarchy is the subjugation of women as “other.”⁴⁶

The Sumerians believed that the underworld contained a variety of spirits and divine beings, most of whom embodied good and evil traits which gave them an ambivalent yet unpredictable (chaotic) quality. To the Sumerians, the underworld was known as Irkalla where the spirits of all ancestors were laid to rest in the “great below.” In Yawism, the underworld was the province of Satan, Yaweh’s nemesis- only evil souls, fallen angels etc were found there.

In pre-Judeo Christian polytheism of Sumer, divinities were often paired as male and female, each bringing balance to the other. In Yawism, woman was made as

⁴³ Keller, Catherine. *Face of the deep: a theology of becoming*. London: Routledge, 2003, 183.

⁴⁴ “ “.

⁴⁵ Cordingly, David. *Seafaring women: adventures of pirate queens, female stowaways, and sailors' wives*. 2007 Random House Trade pbk. ed. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007.

⁴⁶ Bloom, Harold. *Alice Walker's The color purple*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000, 157.

subordinate to man therefore a man was closer to god on the ladder of divinity. The Sumerian pantheon consisted of a plethora of goddesses, while Abrahamic patriarchal monotheistic religions worshipped a singular god who was notoriously intolerant of other deities. "Yawistic faith was strongly opposed to polytheistic and fertility religion."⁴⁷

The intertwined philosophies of Mani and Yawism⁴⁸ parsed life into dichotomous categories of good and evil and gave rise to an absolutist fundamentalist religious fervor that painted non Yawist religions and divinities as evil. The Dark Goddess was virtually eviscerated from sacred texts and liturgy, and was demoted to demon, witch and monster.

After the collision of Sumerian polytheistic religion with Abrahamic monotheism, the Dark Goddess was painted with evil brush strokes. As patriarchy inculcated Near Eastern consciousness, myths changed to reflect the subjugation of goddesses, ranging from rape, torture, murder, and annihilation. Conquering powers employed religious syncretism by rewriting the myths of those they defeated as a strategy to install rule.

As the Dark Goddess became vilified, the male hero was exalted as the savior of humanity. In Enuma Elish, Marduk brutally murders Tiamat in one of the oldest written records of Chaoskampf (struggle against chaos). Sumerian hero Marduk fashions the universe out of his grandmother Tiamat's entrails, exalting the homicide as an act of creation. Chaoskampf has been a pervasive mythologem since the advent of patriarchy. Apollo's slaying of the python at Delphi, Seth slaying Apoph the sea

⁴⁷ Bromiley, Geoffrey William. "Religions: Assyria and Babylonia." In The International standard Bible encyclopedia . Fully rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979/1988. 94.

⁴⁸ Forsyth, Neil. The old enemy: Satan and the combat myth. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987, 394.

serpent and Yam the sea in Egypt, St. George and the Dragon, Baal and Lotan, Yaweh and Leviathan are just a few examples of this ubiquitous Western theme.⁴⁹

The Dark Goddess as the archetype of chaos mutated into sea monster, serpent or dragon. These chaotic theriomorphic beings were demonized so that they might be sacrificed for the hero (Great Man) mythos to thrive. The sea monsters Leviathan, Charybdis, the Gorgon Medusa, Echidna, Chimera, Hydra and Lamia, share serpentine and aquatic traits which include teeth, fins and claws share one unifying similarity: they are all female. In Freudian interpretation, phallic envy is the motive of these castrating *vagina dentatas*. In feminist Freudian analysis the Dark Goddess' conquest occurred as the result of male womb envy resulting in a mythic patriarchal reversal.

Lamaštu was once a "supreme goddess, "Mother of Gods" worshipped at Der as a serpent with a woman's head."⁵⁰ She began as a Lamassu: a protective wind spirit then morphed into Lamaštu, a euphemism for disease and destruction, then to Lamia a rape victim turned baby eating vampire, and became conflated with Hebrew Lilith as Satan's consort and ultimate whore. It is apparent that Lamaštu and subsequent variations Lamia and Lilith became progressively more grotesque and horrific over time.

The archeological evidence pertaining to Lamaštu consists mainly of apotropaic and prophylactic amulets and plaques. Bronze Age cuneiform inscriptions, "Lamaštu, daughter of Anu, named by the gods" in the Iron Age became, "Lamaštu, daughter of Anu, that is her first name" omitting her divine lineage.⁵¹ As the daughter of heaven,

⁴⁹ Pinch, Geraldine. Handbook of Egyptian mythology . Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002, 199.

⁵⁰ Walker, Barbara. Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. New Jersey: Castle Books, 1996, 527.

⁵¹ Wiggermann, F. A. M.. Mesopotamian protective spirits: the ritual texts. Groningen: STYX & PP Publications, 1992, 224.

Anu, Lamaštu is the sister of Inanna and a high ranking goddess. Then because of insubordination “*malku parru ulsah ‘u*” negative disposition “*temu la damqua*” and individual “*istiat*” behavior traits, Lamashtu was cast out of heaven. Her odious infraction was to request babies flesh for dinner.⁵² As a rule breaker and magician Lamaštu is the archetype of the trickster: she is the “counter impulse and the personification of disorder” that moves life in a surprising new direction.⁵³

Lamaštu’s mythical deterioration reverberates with other Near Eastern goddesses Inanna, Ishtar, Asherah, Anat, Atargatis, Husbishag,⁵⁴ who have also been demonized under patriarchal monotheistic influence. Lamaštu was called *Ardat Lili*, which means a “woman of marrying age without a husband”⁵⁵ emphasizing the lasciviousness of remaining out of male control by refusing to become a wife. Later artifacts name dog-faced, scorpion-tailed Pazuzu, king of the evil demons (lilitu) ⁵⁶ as her consort and the only divinity believed to drive Lamashtu away.

Originally the Akkadian word *lamassu* (Sumerian = lamma) was a generic term for any daemon (daemon = spirit, not devil or demon). The literal translation is means “fiery one” and in Chaldean astronomy was associated with the constellation Denebola, which means “tail of the lion which might explain why Lamaštu was later imagined as a lioness.”⁵⁷ Lamassi were the colossal statues, usually of winged bulls at the entrance to

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⁵³ Nicholas, Dean Andrew. *The trickster revisited: deception as a motif in the Pentateuch*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009, 16.

⁵⁴ Pirani, Alix. *The Absent mother: restoring the goddess to Judaism and Christianity*. London: Mandala, 1991.

⁵⁵ Thompson, Henry O.. *Mekal, the God of Beth-Shan*, . Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970.

⁵⁶ Wiggermann, F. A. M.. *Mesopotamian protective spirits: the ritual texts*. Groningen: STYX & PP Publications 225

⁵⁷ Brown, Robert. *Researches into the origin of the primitive constellations of the Phoenicians, Greeks and Babylonians*. Ann Arbor: Out of print books on demand, 1990.

temples in Sumer.⁵⁸ In the Hebrew Old Testament lamassi would be analogous to the fiery winged seraphim. In an old Babylonian hymn, lamassu spirits are summoned by the goddess Ishtar for protection.⁵⁹ A *lamassu* was a personal deity who could be invoked to intercede on behalf of the supplicant.⁶⁰ Sumerians believed that if a person became ill their personal lamassu had been unsuccessful in preventing disease. A lamassu's job was to protect their person from malicious daemons, but must be coaxed with sacerdotal offerings in order to intervene. The lamassu's primary role was tutelary deity who would unseat a malicious daemon by taking his or her place in the body of the victim, restoring health and wellbeing.⁶¹

The older incarnations of Lamaštu describe her as a potent goddess and regenerative who will destroy or protect to restore the sacred balance of life and death. The amulets featured on subsequent pages invoke Lamaštu as *Labartu*, a female daemon associated with Babylonian date palm goddess, Ištar.⁶² Labartu was a collective term for "the Seven" names of Lamaštu, which if spoken could invite her unwanted attention.⁶³ In order to exorcise the daemon, every one of its names would need to be used in the incantation in order to manipulate it. One of the names of Lamaštu was "controller of the slayers of the hand of Irnina" (another name for Inanna/Ištar). Irnini/Irnina is often used synonymously with Labartu.⁶⁴ Some sources name Labartu as "the seven witches" illustrative of the magnitude of her powers as a

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⁵⁹ Beaulieu, Paul. The pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian period . Leiden: Brill ;, 2003, 137.

⁶⁰ Morgenstern, Julian. The doctrine of sin in the .Babylonian religion, .Berlin: Peiser, 1905, 44.

⁶¹ " "27.

⁶² " " 16.

⁶³ Cunningham, Graham. Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations, 2500-1500 BC. Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1997, 109.

⁶⁴ American university of Beirut museum of archaeology: Berytus archaeological studies Volumes 14-16 (1961).

sorceress.⁶⁵ Labasu means “to overthrow” in Sumerian- apropos of a defiant fallen goddess and trickster.⁶⁶ One of Lamaštu’s trickster ploys was to impersonate a nurse or midwife and suckle venom to a newborn in order to kill it. Lamaštu is often shown nursing a pup (dog, wolf or jackal) and a piglet, which could be sacrificial replacements for the children she might poison with her venomous breast milk.⁶⁷

Lamaštus companions were said to be *lilu*, wind demons who were believed to inflict fever, and to seduce men in their dreams. Lilu became Lilith of the Hebrew Old Testament who derived much of her mythos from Lamaštu. Both Lamaštu and Lilith were described as wind spirits, however only Lilith is rendered with wings on amulets and plaques. It is rare for a demon, and arguably an excommunicated goddess such as Lamaštu to have such a pervasive and consistent iconography.⁶⁸ Lamaštu is frequently featured standing in a boat over the Hubur river, also known as uruh muti, or way of death.⁶⁹ The dead were believed to travel westward toward the setting sun on the Uruh Muti.

The Carnelian amulet below is Neo-Assyrian, 800-700 BCE and features an open mouthed, leonine headed Lamaštu standing in a boat with arms outstretched arms holding a spindle in her right hand and a lamp in her right hand. On the back of the lozenge is the inscription "Lamaštu, daughter of An, chosen by the gods, lady, most

⁶⁵ Lamashtu (Mesopotamian demon) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia." Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/328457/Lamashtu> (accessed May 15, 2011).

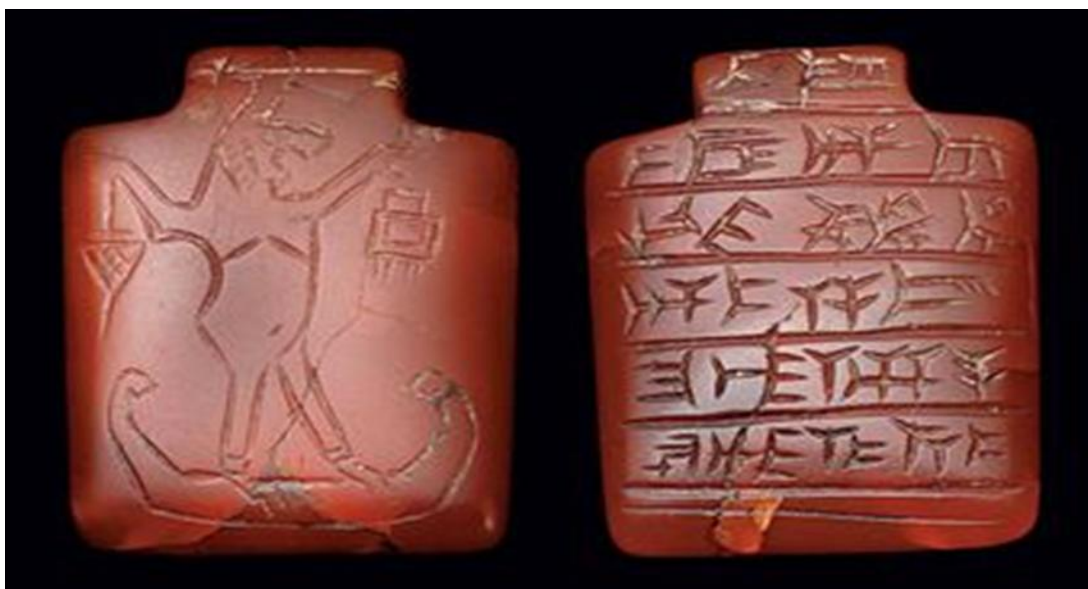
⁶⁶ Morgenstern, Julian. The doctrine of sin in the .Babylonian religion, . Berlin: Peiser, 1905, 15

⁶⁷ Wiggermann, F. A. M.. Mesopotamian protective spirits: the ritual texts. Groningen: STYX & PP Publications, 1992, 239.

⁶⁸ “ “ 219.

⁶⁹ Languages, University of Chicago. Dept. of Semitic, and Literatures. "The American journal of Semitic languages and literatures." Google Books. http://books.google.com/books?id=Gm21hvOjPYC&pg=PA171&dq=Uruh+Muti&hl=en&ei=zQXXTZmUllmisAOAk9mxBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=Uruh%20Muti&f=false (accessed May 20, 2011).

noble of ladies.” This suggests that in Babylonia and Assyria Lamaštu was regarded as a sovereign goddess who was deserving of respect. Lamaštu was said to be the daughter of the Sumerian sky god An and Antu, but I propose the reference points to the Ugaritic goddess Anat/Anath or possibly the Egyptian god Anubis. Lamaštu’s theriomorphic characteristics may parallel those of the dark gods of Egypt: Seth’s animal is the donkey and Anubis is the jackal headed god.



Seth was a god of storms, chaos and the desert in Egypt who was a hybridity of jackal or fox, aardvark and lion. Sumerians believed that dreaming of catching a fox would bring a lamassu, or good fortune, and dreaming of an escaping fox would signal the escape of a lamassu. There is a literary connection (possibly a pun) between the Sumerian word for fox, *ka*, and the word for lamma *ankal* that is not incidental; the fox and the lamassu were omens of good luck.⁷⁰ There are striking reverberations between Seth’s iconography and Lamaštu’s: both are defiant tricksters whose function

⁷⁰ Bottéro, Jean. "7." In *Mesopotamia: writing, reasoning, and the gods*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 122.

in mythology is to break through boundaries. Seth is often shown riding a donkey and was called “the braying one.” Seth’s sacred symbol was the delta (triangle) and triangles are sometimes written on amulets to Lamaštu, though their meaning is inconclusive.⁷¹ The name Seth means “terrible roaring god” in Egyptian. The similarities between Egyptian and Sumerian iconography must be weighed cautiously, avoiding the pitfall Samuel Sandmel calls “parallelomania.”

The black Sumerian amulet below, 883-612 BC, appears to be a donkey (or crudely drawn lioness) headed pregnant Lamaštu nursing a dog or possibly a jackal and a piglet emphasizing her life sustaining powers.⁷² Presumably the boat that Lamaštu stands upon will carry her back to the underworld with offerings of propitiation. Offerings of fibulae, combs, and curiously centipedes were put in small boats and set adrift in rivers for Lamaštu.⁷³



⁷¹ West, David R.. Some cults of Greek goddesses and female daemons of Oriental origin . Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1995, 261.

⁷² Sakhaei, 1985: Eshagh, Brighton, and 27 February 1985.. "Amulet depicting Lamashtu | Museum of Fine Arts, Boston." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston | . <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/amulet-depicting-lamashtu-164562> (accessed May 16, 2011).

⁷³ “ “

In Sumerian mythology, the underworld, Irkalla was ruled by the serpent goddess Ningishzida, which translates to “Goddess of the Good Tree” who was later rewritten as a male god in yet another example of a patriarchal reworking of myth.⁷⁴ The prefix Nin originally meant “lady” in early Sumerian language, and was later changed to mean “lord.”⁷⁵ The tree of life and the serpent are aniconic representations of the Great Mother Goddess.⁷⁶ As tree roots reach down into the underworld, their coiled roots appear as serpents, and intertwine with serpents, representing the regenerative nature of life.

Ningishzida is likely the archetypal prototype of Satan from the Hebrew Old Testament. In Sumerian lore Ningishzida was the guardian of Anu’s temple and is the oldest representation of the double twining serpents. It is worth noting that dragons are winged serpents; a common opponent of the male hero in Western myth. Lamaštu’s Greek variant Lamia was serpentine from the waist down. The etymology of the word dragon stems from δράκων Greek for drakeōn, meaning to see clearly which invokes the Pythia-black sibyls who gave prophecy at Delphi and used snakes in their rituals.

Anu was represented by the jackal, whose antecedent was probably Egyptian psychopomp Anubis⁷⁷. Recall that Anu is Lamaštu’s sky father god. The jackal is often interchangeable with the fox Sumerian lore as the archetype of the trickster. The fox is associated with sorcery and the Sumerian god Enki (Akkadian Ea-for god of the East, probably derived from Easter = Ištar), who was the god of magic and music. Jackals

⁷⁴ Barton, George A. A sketch of Semitic origins, social and religious,. New York: The Macmillan Company; 1902, 190.

⁷⁵ “ “ 192

⁷⁶ Gimbutas, Marija, and Miriam Robbins Dexter. The living goddesses . Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

⁷⁷ Willis, Roy G.. World mythology . New York: H. Holt, 1993, 45.

howl at sunset and are known for scavenging flesh from cemeteries another nexus to the underworld. Anubis was black, the color of rotting flesh and also fresh soil, symbolizing the regenerative nature of life and death. Anubis was the son of Nephythus, who was the invisible mother, the Queen who lies below, ruler of the underworld. Egyptian Nephythus' Sumerian counterpart was Ereshkigal. Seth was Nephythus' consort.

Here is another Sumerian amulet fragment depicting Lamaštu as she nurses pig and whelp while holding two polysepalous (double-headed) snakes. Snakes represent death and rebirth, as they shed their skin and were emblematic of herpemancy (snake magic). Snakes were often found in tombs, and so were perceived as gatekeepers of the underworld, or spirits of the ancestors. Herpemancy is paradoxically destructive and healing; the snake becomes the initiator into the descent to the underworld through its bite. If the human survives a snake bite, she has crossed a threshold of the great mystery of the cycle of life and death. Snakes could also be Lamaštu's weapon of choice to infect her victims. The canine-headed creatures on the right side of the piece is probably Puzuzu, and the lamp on a stand on the right side of Lamaštu is probably the Lamp of Nuska, a magical lamp that protects against evil spirits.



In Sumerian and Akkadian, Lamaštu is synonymous with illness, known as “bile which extinguishes, Lamaštu the great snatcher, the bite of a dog, the teeth of a man.” Lamaštu was of the class of udug or (utukku plural) a spirit whom could be benevolent or malicious. Daimons were known as udugs, gallos, or lammas, which could be evil and harmful or protective and good. Lamaštu was one of the seven utukku were believed to be born of An and Antu (Ki). Lamaštu was among the evil spirits, chaos-monsters, and witches associated with venom from poisonous snakes and scorpions. As an ardat lilli, or unmarried woman, Lamaštu was marginalized, and called ba-ar-ba-ra-tum or she-wolf, with “pa-ni kal-ba-tim” or the face of a bitch. The lamp of Nuska, (the god of fire) and its ascending flame are associated with both heaven and the

underworld was believed to be apotropaic and prophylactic to evil spirits including Lamaštu.

The drawing on page 22 is an apotropaic plaque held by Pazuzu, a dog or centipede headed wind demon believed to be able to prevent Lamaštu from doing harm.⁷⁸ It is called the “Hell Plaque” at the Louvre, and is Neo-Assyrian, 932-612 BC. The scene appears to be an exorcism of Lamaštu as the unwelcome visitor and bringer of disease to a specific person referenced in the plaque. At the top, are symbols of Mesopotamian deities; the sun a symbol of Shamash, the crescent moon of Sin, the lightning bolt of the storm god Adad, and the winged disc of Ašur, the supreme god of the Assyrian Empire. In the second row are seven theriomorphic daemons with upraised fists who seem to be blocking entrance of Lamaštu to the sick person’s room. These beneficent daemons, called Sebittu or Iminbi, could be summoned through incantations to repel evil spirits.⁷⁹

In the center of the plaque is the bedridden victim of illness flanked by two male Apkallū (magical physicians) clothed in fish habiliments performing the sacred rites associated with the exorcism. The caption explains that the two sorcerers are disguised as fish try to induce Lamaštu to retreat from the patient, cross the Bitter River (Uru

⁷⁸ Plaque for protection against the female demon Lamashtu Near Eastern Antiquities | Louvre Museum." Site officiel du musée du Louvre.

http://www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/detail_notice.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225279&CURRENT_LL_V_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225279&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=9852723696500800&baseIndex=42&bmLocale=en (accessed May 16, 2011).

⁷⁹ Black, Jeremy A., Anthony Green, and Tessa Rickards. Gods, demons, and symbols of ancient Mesopotamia: an illustrated dictionary. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

Hutu), and go back to the world below.”⁸⁰ The Bitter River, Mother Hutur is the underworld river that fashions all things hearkening back to Tiamat.

Leonine headed Lamaštu is at the bottom of the plaque standing on an ass in a boat, suckling piglets and brandishing snakes. Pazuzu, described as Lamaštu’s consort is seen at the top of the plaque overlooking the exorcism scene, as well as to the left of Lamaštu with upraised fist driving her back to the underworld river of Uruh Hutu. Pazuzu dog-headed amulets were worn by pregnant women or buried under their houses, and plaques hung over their beds as guard dogs to defend against Lamaštu.⁸¹ Incidentally Puzuzu was also apotropaic for defense against Lilitu, another wind spirit that later became conflated with Lamaštu.

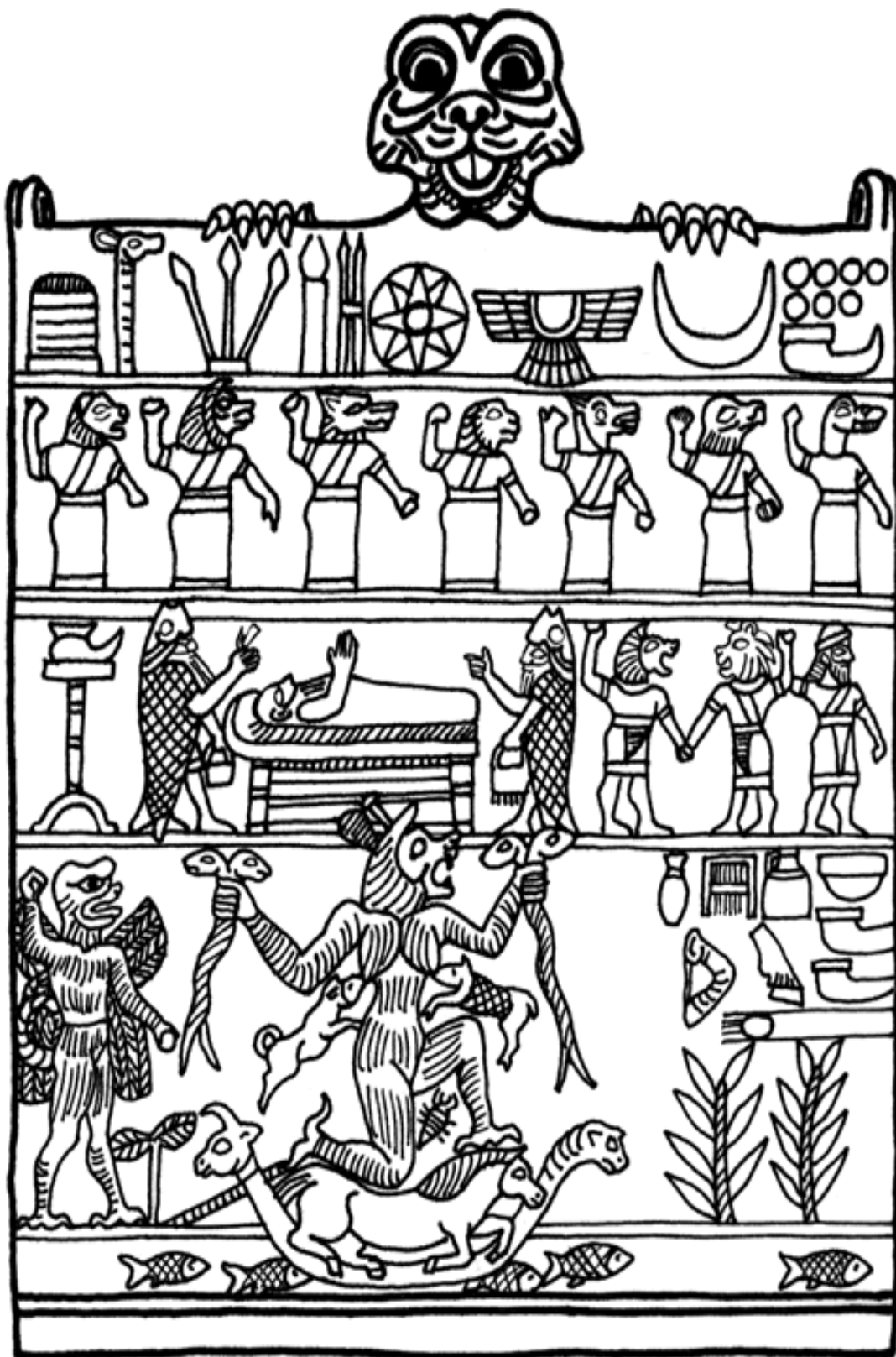
Akpallu, the male magical physicians probably displaced sorceresses in the practice of Near Eastern medicine and midwifery. “Among Semites, priestly functions were confined to the male sex.”⁸² The name of the ceremony being performed was called kupurru in Sumerian, and the state of uncleanness the sick person was to be cured from was called mamitu. *Dumuqu* and *ullulu* were the Sumerian words which meant that the ill person had been purified and restored to health.⁸³

⁸⁰ Foster, Benjamin R., *Distant Days*. Yale University, CDL Press, 1995:

⁸¹ Stol, Marten, and F. A. M. Wiggermann. *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: its Mediterranean setting*. Groningen: Styx, 2000, 239.

⁸² Morgenstern, Julian. *The doctrine of sin in the Babylonian religion*, . Berlin: Peiser, 1905, 15.

⁸³ “ “ 27.



The incantation to Lamaštu below is evocative of her power:⁸⁴

*Great is the daughter of Heaven [the god Anu]] who tortures babies,
 Her hand is a net, her embrace is death.
 She is cruel, raging, angry, predatory...
 She touches the bellies of women in labor
 She pulls out the pregnant women's baby
 The daughter of Heaven is one of the Gods, her brothers
 With no child of her own
 Her head is a lion's head
 Her body is a donkey's body
 She roars like a lion
 She constantly howls like a demon-dog. (Probably a wolf or jackal)*

Lamaštu amulets and Pazuzu heads were found in North Syria, Ugarit and Cyprus. Lamaštu was thought to enter the house at night and touch a pregnant woman's belly seven times to inflict miscarriage. Lamaštu is said to have had seven names, The number seven seemed to connect to childbirth as well as to the seven heavens and seven underworlds of Sumerian mythology.⁸⁵ Another inscription describes Lamaštu, "furious and cruel, a dazzling goddess; she is a she-wolf; she snatches the young man on the path, the girl at play, the child from the arms of his nurse."⁸⁶ The subtext suggests that a childless, independent woman is dangerous and vindictive. As a trickster midwife who murders babies, the Lamaštu myth probably

⁸⁴ Johanna. "Goddesses and Demons: Some Thoughts by Johanna Stuckey." MatriFocus Web Magazine for Goddess Women. <http://www.matrifocus.com/BEL07/spotlight.htm> (accessed May 16, 2011).

⁸⁵ Cunningham, Graham. Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations, 2500-1500 BC. Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1997,109.

⁸⁶ Louvre Website, louvre.fr....Hell Plaque

engendered terror in Sumerian women preventing them from assisting each other with childbirth, turning to the apkallus instead.

The early work of Sappho 700 CE, mentions an evil Gallo, who was also said to steal and eat children.⁸⁷ Lamaštu mutated into the Greek serpent goddess Lamia,⁸⁸ ancestress of the black doves,⁸⁹ the Dogon sibyls who may have been stolen from Libya and forced to return to Delphi to give prophecy. The sibyls oracular priestesses and were called Pythia because of their use of herpency. As physical incarnations of the Dark Goddess, the sibyls were known as the Delphic Oracle. In Greek myth, Apollo slays a python, symbolic of the Pythia prophetesses, rendering the Dark Goddess as healer priestess, prophetess and sovereign goddess archetypally inert. Lamia was the Queen of Libya (in North Africa); sired by King Belos and Lybie (the female personification of the region of Libya). In the following passage, however, Pausanias claims that Poseidon, the oceanic god, sired Lamia, giving her divine lineage, and tying her mythos to the chaotic sea:⁹⁰

There is a rock rising up above the ground [at Delphi]. On it, say the Delphians, there stood and chanted the oracles a woman, by name Herophile and surnamed Sibylla. The former Sibylla I find was as ancient as any; the Greeks say that she was a daughter of Zeus by Lamia, daughter of Poseidon, that she was the first woman to chant oracles, and that the name Sibylla was given her by the Libyans.

⁸⁷ Burkert, Walter. "A Seer or a Healer." In *The orientalizing revolution: Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the early archaic age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992. 82-83.

⁶³ Walker, Barbara. *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. New Jersey: Castle Books, 1996.

⁸⁹ Zogbe, Mama. *The Sibyls: The First Prophetess* of Mami Wata. Martinez: Vivien Hunter-Hindrew, 2007.

⁹⁰ Pausanias. In *Pausanias's Description of Greece V5*. www.google.books.com: Google Books, 2007. 288.

A key theme in Greek mythology is the “gradual reduction of women from sacred beings to chattels.”⁹¹ Lamia bore Zeus’ rape spawn inciting Hera’s wrath. Hera kidnapped and ate Lamia’s children, leaving Scylla and Akheilios as the only surviving offspring.⁹² Lamia was so enraged and consumed with grief that she demanded Zeus make amends to her. Zeus responded by bestowing Lamia the ability to remove her eyes from their sockets, so that she would not be able to be reminded of her heart ache. How this was supposed to assuage her emotional pain remains unclear, but the message that women are to be used and disposed of by men and gods without significant consequence can be gleaned from the subtext. Lamia was so stricken with agony and rage that she began killing babies and children as retribution. Lamia’s destructive response to Zeus’ and Hera’s unpunished crimes restores justice in the story, albeit horrifically.

Rape is a theme of Greek mythos, “whereby a patriarchal society writes oppressive dictates on women’s bodies and minds, destroying both subjectivity and voice.”⁹³ In a patriarchal reworking of matristic mythos, the old goddesses were raped by gods. Zeus’ failure to atone for his rape and his wife Hera’s kidnapping and murder sends the message that to resist patriarchal domination is futile.

For Lamia, a sibyl with second sight, eye removal is symbolic of turning a blind eye to injustice wrought on her and womankind by men: “...men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. Women, potential

⁹¹ Graves, Robert, and Raphael Patai. *Hebrew myths: the book of genesis*. New York: Greenwich House, 1983, 15.

⁹² Rose, Carol. *Giants, monsters, and dragons: an encyclopedia of folklore, legend, and myth*. New York: Norton, 2001.

⁹³ Bloom, Harold. *Alice Walker's The color purple*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000, 146.

victims, fall prey to absence, silence, and madness.”⁹⁴ Since Zeus and Hera’s crimes are never atoned, Lamia metes out revenge by devouring children and suffocating fetuses. Lamia’s beautiful form morphs into a grotesque hybrid serpent woman, with hairy, leopard splotched skin after she is transformed by grief and rage.

“Patriarchal discourse, a language system that grants men the right to be articulate subjects, while portraying women as silent objects”⁹⁵ is evident in the denigration of Lamastu in her successive renderings. The shift of Lamaštu’s mythos from handmaiden of Inanna, and tutelary deity to poisonous infanticidal succubus has been pervasive, and variants of the ugly witch are ubiquitous in most cultures arguably as a result of patriarchal subjugation of the divine feminine.

The story of Lamaštu, a childless autonomous woman warns that to go against the grain of the dominant culture will lead to ruin. In Sumeria as Dim-me, and Babylon as Lamassu she was simply a spirit. Subsequent Akkadian incarnations of Lamashtu evinced consolidation into the shadow of the patriarchal mask synonymous with disease and death. The Greeks gave modus operandi for her heinous behavior, blaming the patriarch Zeus for the displaced affliction upon humanity for failing to bring Lamašu justice.

Subsequent mutations of Lamaštu seem to have assimilated Assyrian Lilith by the Middle Babylonian period (circa 1150-900 BCE). Lamaštu’s mythos has travelled as far as Finland where she is known as as Loimu, and Azerbaijan where she is Lamas. In Persia she was known as Layla, which means simply “night.” Lamaštu and all her

⁹⁴ Bloom, Harold. *Alice Walker's The color purple*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000, 183.

⁹⁵ “ “ 158.

many incarnations is the trickster dark goddess with the slithery underbelly from whom society turns away in revulsion. A malevolent Lamaštu intervention destroys and yet paradoxically restores balance of the cosmic order. To understand Lamaštu's lamentation requires hovering over the waters, and looking squarely into the mirror of the deep. The paradox in the witnessing of the shadow, which includes Lamaštu among other dark disowned goddesses, is that wisdom reflects back to us. By becoming conscious we no longer take out our eyes from their sockets and project our shadows onto the world. In closing, Lamaštu will have her final say, grinning devilishly, through huge donkey teeth and gaping mouth; ever the trickster, betwixt and between worlds, refusing to be dominated and dispensing justice on *her* terms. I offer this excerpt from Thunder Perfect Mind⁹⁶ as an imaginary howl-roar from Lamaštu's to all those who would ignore or subjugate the Dark Goddess. Hell hath no fury.....

Do not banish me from your sight.

And do not make your voice hate me, nor your hearing.

Do not be ignorant of me anywhere or any time. Be on your guard!

Do not be ignorant of me.

For I am the first and the last

I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am and the daughter.

I am the members of my mother.

And many are her sons.

⁹⁶ MacRae, George W.. The Thunder, Perfect mind: (Nag Hammadi codex VI, tractate 2) : protocol of the fifth colloquy, 11 March 1973. Berkeley, Calif.: The Center, 1975.