

The Usage of Pazuzu and Lamashtu Amulets in Mesopotamian Birthing Practices

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There are very few common experiences in life; indeed, the only truly universal experiences are birth and death. Although much is known about the archaeology of death, which can be researched through the excavation of grave sites, there is comparatively very little known about the archaeology of birth. Despite this fact, it is widely known and accepted that amulets related to specific spiritual entities were used in relation to Mesopotamian birthing practices to ensure the survival and health of both mothers and children.¹ However, clues to these amulets' usages are strikingly sparse within archaeological contexts.² This absence is compounded with the fact that such subjects as birthing and perinatal mortality have been historically ignored by archaeological researchers resulting in a conspicuous gap in modern scholarship related to the usage of amulets in Mesopotamian birthing practices.³ The legacy of these issues combine to force modern scholars to pull upon the incomplete knowledge of identified amulets as well as textual evidence to understand the relationship between religion and the early stages of motherhood and childhood in ancient Mesopotamia. This paper will aim to address and fill in some of these gaps by understanding the contexts under which archaeological information was lost and by exploring case studies of two amulets that were likely used in religious rituals related to the early stages of motherhood and childhood.

The act of giving birth in times before modern medicine is well known to have been exceedingly dangerous. Without modern antibiotics, surgical capabilities, or imaging techniques,

¹ Beatrice L. Goff, "The Rôle of Amulets in Mesopotamian Ritual Texts," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19, no. 1-2 (January 1956): p. 25.

² Ignacio Márquez Rowe, "Ceramic Stamp-Seal Amulets in the Shape of the Head of Pazuzu," *Iraq* 71 (2009): p. 156.

³ Christina Torres-Rouff and William J. Pestle, "An Exploration of Infant Burial Practices at the Site of Kish, Iraq," *Bioarchaeology and Behavior*, 2012, pp. 35-59.

there are many perils involved with giving birth. With a lack of nutritional understanding, vaccines, and safe living conditions, maternal and infant mortality rates remained high in most cultures until relatively recently.⁴ In order to mitigate many of the dangers related to childbirth and early infancy, people within ancient Mesopotamia commonly relied on magical practices.⁵ Indeed, references to the usage of amulets are commonplace in Mesopotamian literature. Often referred to as magical “stones” or “beads”, there it references in many contexts such as those of medicine and divine adornments.⁶ While it is generally known that both Pazuzu and Lamashtu amulets were used in Mesopotamian magical practices related to birthing and early infancy, many of the specifics remain opaque or missing completely. As a result of this, most of these practices are understood through a literary context, as many rituals and spells related to these topics have been preserved in the forms of writing tablets inscribed with cuneiform texts. Thankfully, cuneiform texts related to birthing spells and incantations are relatively common and well-studied. It is specifically because of these texts that we understand that amulets were employed in rituals that were meant to ensure the safety of pregnant mothers and young children. Although the Akkadian and Sumerian languages, which were primarily used in ancient Mesopotamia, lack a specific word for amulets, they nonetheless make up for this through their descriptions of different stones used in magical contexts. A prime example of this would be the description of semi-opaque "milk stones" which are believed to have been amulets used to aid in the production of milk by young mothers.⁷

The first issue that arises in studying the usage of amulets for Mesopotamian birthing practices is that of material deposition. In order for archaeological artifacts to be meaningfully

⁴ Jonathan Valk, “‘They Enjoy Syrup and Ghee at Tables of Silver and Gold’: Infant Loss in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 5 (July 2016): pp. 695-749.

⁵ Ignacio Márquez Rowe, “Ceramic Stamp-Seal Amulets in the Shape of the Head of Pazuzu,” p. 157.

⁶ E. Douglas Van Buren, “Amulets in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Orientalia* 14 (1945): pp. 18-23.

⁷ E. Douglas Van Buren, “Amulets in Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 18.

studied, they must be found in a context that aids in illuminating their usage. For this reason, much is known about the archaeology of certain trade crafts such as metalworking and ceramic production, as both of these leave meaningful quantities of material evidence in easily identifiable contexts such as workshops and kilns. In contrast, the religious elements of childbirth, such as the usage of amulets are significantly harder to find traces of in the archaeological context. This lack of context arises because so much of the usage of amulets is tied to acts of ritual which usually have very few material byproducts that would survive in the archaeological record. Additionally, because these amulets would often be reused over time and migrate through communities, they are often not purposefully discarded or deposited.⁸ The confluence of these factors results in a situation in which amulets, when found, are often not in the context in which they were used. Although some Lamashtu and Pazuzu amulets are found in funerary settings, those relevant amulets which are found purposely placed in graves are removed from the context of birthing as this would have taken place within a domestic sphere.⁹

Another factor in the archaeology of Mesopotamian birthing amulets that serves to complicate their study is the lack of meaningful archaeological records. As so much of the archaeological material related to the ancient Near East was excavated in the early 20th century, it coincided with a time in which excavation and notation practices were of secondary and tertiary focus to the goal of finding interesting materials. A prime example of this is the early excavations of the city of Ur, as conducted by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley. At times, Sir Woolley employed over 300 workmen who were given little oversight by the small team of trained archaeologists,

⁸ Beatrice L. Goff, "The Rôle of Amulets in Mesopotamian Ritual Texts," pp. 1-39.

⁹ Stefania Mazzoni, "Having and Showing: Women's Possessions in the Afterlife in Iron Age Syria and Mesopotamia," in *Women and Property*, 2005, pp. 3-4.

and by the end of his time as the excavation's director, Woolley had uncovered over 2,000 burials.¹⁰ As a result of massive excavations such as this, many of the known Pazuzu and Lamashtu amulets have unrecorded contexts or provenances.¹¹ Furthermore, many of the amulets which have been properly recorded have been found in grave contexts that are largely unrelated to their usages in birthing practices. As a result of these factors, most Pazuzu and Lamashtu amulets which exist in museum and university collections are difficult to study in terms of their archaeological contexts and so must be primarily examined through their physical characteristics.

The final issue when studying the usage of magical amulets in Mesopotamian birthing practices is that of subject matter. Up until recently, the subject of birth and pregnancy has been neglected in the academic sphere due to its perception as being taboo. As a result of this, many of the archaeologists who were conducting mass-scale Near Eastern excavations in the early 20th century neglected the topic of childbirth. This neglect has created a conspicuous vacuum in the scholarship and has only recently given way to the archaeological study of birth, early motherhood, and childhood.¹²

The Greater Evil: Lamashtu

The various dangers present in the lives of pregnant mothers and young children are often personified through the spiritual entity known as a Lamashtu.¹³ In texts, Lamashtu is often referred to in contexts of perinatal sickness and death for both mothers and children. An example of this is tablet NBC 3672 from the Yale Babylonian Collection (fig. 1), which ends with the sentence "She

¹⁰ "Woolley's Excavations," UrOnline (Ur Digitization Project - Penn Museum & British Museum), accessed October, 2022.

¹¹ P. R. Moorey, "A Bronze 'Pazuzu' Statuette from Egypt," *Iraq* 27, no. 1 (1965): p. 36.

¹² Sally Crawford, Dawn M. Hadley, and Gillian Shepherd, "The Archaeology of Childhood: The Birth and Development of a Discipline," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Childhood* (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 3-37.

¹³ Marten Stol and F. A. M. Wiggermann, "Chapter 10: Lamastu, Daughter of Anu, a Profile," in *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Gronigen: Styx, 2000), pp. 217-249.

(Lamashtu) weakens the body/flesh of the child and the baby".¹⁴ These Lamashtu spirits, often characterized in texts as demons, are depicted as lion-headed women and are often surrounded by snakes or by dogs suckling at their breasts.

The common form for an amulet related to Lamashtu is a small rectangular stone plaque with a depiction of the spirit on the obverse and with a text on the reverse. A commonality between these plaques is the presence of a small protrusion at the top of the plaque.



Figure 1: NBC 3672

A notable example of a Lamashtu amulet, likely dating to the first millennium BCE, depicts the spirit as a lion-headed woman with talon-like feet (fig. 2).¹⁵ In this amulet The Lamashtu stands on the back of a donkey, holding snakes in either hand and has a jackal and a wild pig suckling at its breasts. The amulet itself is a small stone rectangle measuring 12.2 cm in height and 6.7 cm in width. The amulet in question bears a similarly obscure and opaque background to many other Mesopotamian amulets. The amulet currently resides in the collections of the British Museum, however, its provenance is largely unknown. The amulet was bought by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley in 1925, and there are conflicting records regarding its country of origin.¹⁶ This serves as a strong example of the issues facing the analysis of these artifacts as, without an archaeological context, its relation to birthing practices must be inferred from its form.

¹⁴ “NBC 3672” (New Haven), accessed 2022, lines 22-24.

¹⁵ John Z. Wee, “The Lamashtu Amulet: A Portrait of the Caregiver as a Demoneess,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, July 1, 2021.

¹⁶ “Lamashtu Amulet,” *The British Museum*, accessed October, 2022.

A notable characteristic of this amulet, which stands in contrast to many other forms of amulets, is that it bears no perforation through which it can be hung by a string. This means that the amulet was most likely not meant to be worn for extended periods and that if it was worn, it may have been concealed within a pouch or other carrying device.¹⁷ Because it was most likely not worn, it can be inferred that this amulet may have only been used during the practicing of rituals or may have been placed within a household or an altar. The inability to easily wear this amulet, in stark contrast to many Pazuzu amulets, means its use was most likely in short intervals, possibly during the reading of relevant incantations or during an exorcism.¹⁸



Figure 2: Lamashtu Amulet from the collections of the British Museum

The Lesser Evil: Pazuzu

Pazuzu is also a dangerous spirit, as it is usually understood to be a personification of a cold mountain wind which was believed to bring sickness and death. That being said, Pazuzu within a mythological context was believed to be the enemy of Lamashtu. As such, Pazuzu amulets were often employed by magical practitioners in order to ward off Lamashtu from pregnant mothers and young children and thus secure their safety.¹⁹ Unlike Lamashtu amulets, Pazuzu amulets often take the form of the spirit's head, and these amulets usually bear protrusion at the

¹⁷ John Z. Wee, "The Lamashtu Amulet: A Portrait of the Caregiver as a Demoness," 2021.

¹⁸ Mordechai Cogan, "A Lamashtu Plaque from the Judaeian Shephelah," *Israel Exploration Journal* 45, no. 2/3 (1995): p. 160.

¹⁹ Frans Wiggermann, "The Four Winds and the Origins of Pazuzu," *Das Geistige Erfassen Der Weltim Alten Orient Beiträge Zu Sprache, Religion, Kulturund Gesellschaft*, 2007, pp. 125-165.

top with a perforation through which a string can be passed to hang the amulet.²⁰ Although Pazuzu amulets were often mass-produced in clay, they were indeed made out of a variety of materials such as metals and semi-precious stones, such as carnelian and lapis lazuli.²¹

A prime example of this is the H.894 Pazuzu-head pendant (fig. 3). The provenance and excavation records of this amulet are largely unknown, first appearing in 1905 when Charles-Louis-Marie de l'Écluse donated it to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France from his private collection.²² This pendant is made out of cast bronze, measuring roughly 5 cm in height and 3.4 cm in diameter. The pendant weighs 142 grams and bears an engraved cuneiform inscription along the backside of the spirit's head. The inscription is in the "standard b incantation" style, describing common actions of the spirit such as freezing over rivers and drying marshlands.²³ The physical form of the Pazuzu amulet is quite regular and recognizable with bulging eyes, a beard, and a dog-like nose and top lip. These are indeed several of the most common features of Pazuzu amulets.²⁴



Figure 3: H.894 Pazuzu-head Pendant

²⁰ P. R. Moorey, "A Bronze 'Pazuzu' Statuette from Egypt," pp. 33-41.

²¹ P. R. Moorey, "A Bronze 'Pazuzu' Statuette from Egypt," pp. 33-41.

²² Zoltán Niederreiter, "Two Pazuzu-Head Amulets Inscribed with the Standard B Incantation," *Revue D'assyriologie Et D'archéologie Orientale* 111, no. 1 (2017): p. 109.

²³ Zoltán Niederreiter, "Two Pazuzu-Head Amulets Inscribed with the Standard B Incantation," p. 113.

²⁴ Nils P Heeßel, "Evil against Evil. The Demon Pazuzu," in *Demoni Mesopotamici, Studi e Materiali Di Storia Delle Religioni*, 2011, p. 358.

Above the head is a perforated protrusion which was likely used for hanging the amulet on a cord or string for it to be carried more easily over a constant period of time as a necklace or bracelet. The form of this amulet thus leads to the conclusion that it may have been used over considerable periods of time in order to ensure the protection of its bearer from Lamashtu. Because of its modest size and weight, it may have been affixed to either adult pregnant women or to children who may have been seen as “at risk” in order to grant them prolonged protection.

An interesting and dynamic factor of this amulet is that it is unapologetically disturbing. Pazuzu is, after all, often seen as a malicious spirit and so the fearsome depiction is no surprise. However, what is surprising is the fact that disturbing depictions such as this were affixed to pregnant mothers and young children. Iconography related to childhood and pregnancy is often purposely made to be visually pleasing, especially in the modern world, and yet the usage of Pazuzu amulets such as this mark an extreme departure from this idea that should not be taken lightly. Indeed the duality of this pendant being a protective amulet and yet still a disturbing image of an evil spirit may be understood just as easily as a social commentary that may characterize nothing as entirely good or entirely evil. The significance of entrusting the safety of a pregnant mother or young child into the hands of a hideous and dangerous spirit is that it either implies a sociocultural understanding in which this characteristically dangerous spirit is seen as also being kind and helpful or a systemic decision throughout Mesopotamian cultures to choose the presence of Pazuzu over the presence of Lamashtu as a "lesser evil".

Although the archaeological backgrounds of both of these amulets are unknown, their cross-comparison leads to significantly more understanding than their interrogation as lone objects. These two amulets, when examined together, reveal a meaningful amount of information about the usage of Lamashtu and Pazuzu amulets within the context of birthing practices, even

despite the amount of information lost from them due to archaeological malpractice. What analysis shows is that when using these amulets, although they were both clearly employed in a ritual setting, Pazuzu amulets were meant to be worn for a longer period of time, and in contrast, Lamashtu amulets may have remained stationary throughout their use. Although both of these spirits are characterized largely as being evil or malicious, the usage of Pazuzu amulets to ward off Lamashtu indicates a clear decision or cultural belief held by cultures within Mesopotamia. The usage of Pazuzu as a protective force may be understood as a social commentary on the absolutism of "good" and "evil", or possibly as a pragmatic decision to choose the "lesser evil" to defend against the "greater evil". Additionally, a commonality held between both of these amulets is that they are made out of durable materials, likely meaning that they were meant to be used and reused over time, and possibly trading hands along the way.²⁵ The durability of these amulets also implies an intrinsic value that these specific amulets must have held to their bearers. This is reflected in both cases by the intricacy of their form. Both of these amulets are finely crafted and were likely the product of skilled craftspeople. As such, these amulets may have not only held an important religious value, but also a notable monetary value.

Many hurdles are present when studying the archaeology of birth in Mesopotamia. Indeed, some of the only commonly known sets of objects related to perinatal activities in Mesopotamia are amulets. Due to several key factors such as the lack of material deposition, archaeological malpractice, and a rejection of the study of birth in an archaeological context, there is a considerable gap in scholarship related to the usage of amulets in Mesopotamian birthing practices. Because of this, the artifacts themselves must be relied upon to fill in the gaps.

²⁵ Beatrice L. Goff, "The Rôle of Amulets in Mesopotamian Ritual Texts," pp. 1-39.

In regards to birthing amulets, the two most common come in the forms of Pazuzu amulets and Lamashtu amulets. While Lamashtu was believed to cause the sickness and deaths of pregnant women and young children, Pazuzu, while also being perceived as an evil spirit, was known to ward off Lamashtu. By examining a Lamashtu and a Pazuzu amulet, several factors become clear in regards to cultural beliefs and the specific usage of these objects. These Amulets allow modern scholars to understand attitudes and ideas surrounding perinatal health in Mesopotamia, which can be extrapolated into larger understandings of societal values in Mesopotamian communities. While much remains unclear about the rituals and intricacies tied to the usage of these amulets, there is nonetheless hope that these gaps may yet be filled.

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