

Seven Babylonian Demons of the Underworld

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Among Babylonian demons we may find a group of spirits called the Maskim, or "Ensnarers," "Layers of ambushes." This class of demons is only vaguely mentioned on clay tablets which constitute the main source of knowledge about Babylonian evil spirits. Most of what we know about the Mesopotamian demons is generally based on incantations, hymns, formulae, and exorcisms against evil spirits. These conjurations were designed to threat demons away, to avert their actions, and to protect people from their attacks. Among them we find a long and suggestive incantation against the seven evil spirits called the Maskim. The formula was translated into English by R.C. Thompson and published in the book *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* in 1903.

The Maskim are most often described as spirits of the Underworld, chthonic entities residing in the bowels of the earth. They are regarded as the most wicked demons which surpass all others in power and evil. The description from the tablets depicts them as messengers of Namtar and the throne-bearers of Ereshkigal, which underlines their connection to the Underworld. Ereshkigal is the "Queen of the Great Below," the goddess who rules the land of the dead, together with her consort, Nergal. Namtar is her messenger and minister, one of the demons of the nether regions, the bringer of death. His name means "destiny" or "death." On the other hand, from the same description we learn that the number of the Maskim is "twice seven:" "seven in heaven, seven on earth." They were created in "heaven's vault" as messengers to the god Anu, and reside in the "height of heaven," appearing on the earth as lightning flashes. Anu (An) means "heaven" and is the name of the god of the sky, the prime mover, the supreme leader of the gods and their father. Thus, the Maskim seem to constitute two distinct groups of spirits, both destructive and terrifying. While the seven underworld demons cause plagues and disasters on the earth (like earthquakes), the sky spirits manifest as raging storms, hurricanes, lightning, and destructive winds "that bring darkness in heaven" and "cast gloom over the bright day."

The tablet, which contains their description, also tells us a legend about them. According to the story, they were born out of Anu, together with other main deities, and are equally ancient. They are referred to alternately as gods, demons and spirits. Their ally is the Imkhullu, "the evil wind," and their main enemy is the god of fire, together with other main deities: Enlil, Ea, and Ishtar. The Maskim were created "to wreak destruction." To avoid it, the gods divided the whole heaven among three of them: Sin, Shamash and Ishtar (Sin - god of the Moon, Shamash - god of the Sun, and Ishtar - the mistress of heavens, daughter to Sin and sister to Shamash). But the seven evil gods stormed the vault of heaven and brought onto their side Sin, Shamash and Adad - the god of storms. They darkened the moon by an eclipse and brought thick clouds to cover the Sun. Darkness fell upon the earth. Neither the Moon nor the Sun were shining. The gods were terrified and called for Marduk, the god of war to fight the demons. Many fragments of the legend are missing, but we can see now how powerful the seven demons were if they managed to threaten the whole divine order. They could ravage heaven and earth, interrupt the movement of the stars, and darken the Sun and the Moon. The gods' efforts to oppose them were futile. Even the powerful god of fire is almost helpless. Among the means of conquering the Seven, the legend mentions some coniferous tree, cypress or cedar, and the magical name "the meaning of which Hea keeps in his heart" (Hea / Ea - the ruler of gods).

From further description we learn more about the nature of the Maskim. They are neither male nor female, without a consort or offspring. They are destructive storms and evil winds. They do not know mercy or compassion, and do not listen to prayers. They rush like flood over the earth:

"From house to house they dash along.
No door can shut them out,
No bolt can turn them back.
Through the door, like a snake, they glide,
Through the hinge, like the wind, they storm.
Tearing the wife from the embrace of the man,
Snatching the child from the knees of a man,
Driving the freedman from his family home."

Here they are also mentioned individually: the first is "the South wind," the second - "a dragon, whose mouth is opened... that none can measure," the third - "a grim leopard, which carries off the young," the fourth - "a terrible Shibbu," the fifth - "a furious Wolf, who knoweth not to flee," the sixth is "a rampant ... which marches against god and king," and the seventh is "a storm, an evil wind, which takes vengeance."

The Maskim embodied the force of chaos, opposed to the normal course of nature. But, as we have already seen, they also attacked humans: "From the four corners the thrust of their advance burns like fire, they violently invade the dwellings of man, they lay bare the town as well as the country." In Simon's Necronomicon, which also mentions the Maskim, we read that they are the lords over the shadows and over the depths of the seas. They reigned once over the lost land of Magan, whence they came.

Let us now take a closer look at the particular demons and their nature. This analysis is based on experiences from a magical project, the purpose of which was exploration of the Maskim through rituals and focused meditations. The project was held in April 2006 as a cooperation between Lodge Magan and Lodge Heldrasil. It included workings devoted to each of the Maskim demons, based on reversed exorcisms and banishing formulae from ancient sources and also incantations from Simon's Necronomicon. Each working was constructed according to similar words of power and incantations. Each also included a symbolic offering and meditation with the Key symbol to establish an astral contact with other participants. With this essay I would like to thank everyone who contributed their report from this project and thus helped in gathering this information.

The first of the Maskim is "the South wind" demon. It is connected with the desert, the heat of the sun and the drought which brings death of humans and animals, diseases and the destruction of crops. It is an extremely hot dark wind, burning everything that it encounters on its way, like a black, demonic fire or a destructive tornado. In Mesopotamia winds and hurricanes were often regarded as demons, usually elemental ones. Sometimes they were believed to be messengers sent by gods to punish humans for their sins. The demon assumes many forms, or appears completely formless - as a whirlpool of black dust. Among shapes which he takes, we can mention a huge, anthropomorphic lizard-like figure with long hair and two pairs of wings; a demonic face with long fiery hair; or a black shape wearing a mask on the face. One of the visions experienced during this magical project included an image of the black wind carving a picture on the desert sand, blood-red in the light of the setting sun. This was a glyph of a human figure with circles in the place of the main chakras, and a symbol of an eye in the place of the throat chakra. This symbol turned out to be an entrance to the Underworld, a pathway from which the black wind was emerging and in which it disappeared. Also many other examples point at the close relation of this demon to the Underworld. The wind blows from a pit in the ground and guides the magician into underground labyrinths, temples, and tunnels, where the black fire burns so fiercely that one can hardly find any air to breathe. The heat burns down the body and releases the spirit. It inflames the magician and makes one a living torch or a fire elemental. In magical work with this demon one may also experience physical sensations of heat, dry air in the temple, or extreme thirst.

The second demon is the dragon "whose mouth is opened ... that none can measure." Dragon-like creatures in ancient Mesopotamia were not always viewed as demonic. In the Sumerian poetry there is a term "ušumgal" (a serpent monster), which does not have any pejorative meaning, however, but denotes a powerful god or a glorious king. In mythology we encounter many dragon creatures, e.g. the serpent-dragon (Mušhuššu), or the lion-dragon (identified sometimes with demons Asag or Anzu). Mušhuššu was a symbol of power, associated with such gods as Marduk, Nabu, or Asur. On the other hand, Asag and Anzu were vicious demons, bringing plagues and disasters on people. The nature of the Maskim dragon-demon also seems complicated. It assumes forms and shapes connected with all elements: it can become a water serpent-dragon, like Leviathan, with its jaws as the waves of the ocean, very cold and silver. But it can also assume a form of a fiery dragon, with electric and fiery breath, casting lightning with its eyes. Furthermore, it can be wholly chthonic – appearing as a part of the earth or the Underworld. Its head is a mountain, and its open jaws are an entrance to the cave, with sharp stones and rocks resembling the teeth of a beast. Its body is the earth with its underground caves, labyrinths and temples, where one can see statues of dragons. Its blood constitutes underground rivers, filled with water which looks like blood in the dim light of the Underworld. And finally, the demon may also assume an airy form. In this shape it appears as a huge cosmic dragon, encircling the whole universe, like Ouroboros serpent. Its jaws are so enormous that it could easily swallow the globe. Its body is the night sky and its scales are the stars that shine in the cosmic space. All these shapes point at the universal nature of the Dragon – an entity containing all four elements within and binding them with the fifth one – the Spirit. The Dragon is also the Kundalini, the serpent power inherent in each human being. Awakened, it rises to the stars and becomes the Dragon. Hence, while working with this demon, one may experience visions and dreams of astral transformation into a dragon's form, or flying on the dragon's back. One may also see an eternal cosmic dance of the Kundalini serpent.

The third demon is "a grim leopard which carries off the young." This entity embodies atavistic instincts of savage hunting. A leopard is an emblem of a wild predator, a shadow demon which hunts under the cloak of the night, searching for a prey. While working with this demon and absorbing its energy, the magician undergoes a transformation into a savage beast. Human instincts are left behind, and one experiences a drive of primal animal impulses, evoking visions of running through the woods and wilderness in search of a prey, violent killing, greedy devouring the flesh and drinking the blood of a victim – as if driven by a primal urge to satisfy the hunger. One may also experience visions of savage and bloody cults in which people are dressed in leopard skins and masks, dancing in a wild fashion around an altar with a freshly captured prey, performing an act of ritual cannibalism. A practice of wearing animal skins is typical of many African tribes. In Nigeria this custom is cultivated in funeral ceremonies, when the deceased are dressed in leopard's skins. Also some sources mention other rites in which priests and participants wear skins of this animal. Leopard's skins were also used in funeral rites of ancient Egypt. In Mesopotamia the practice of wearing animal skins was not unknown, either. On ancient reliefs we can often see people dressed in lion skins, embodying the powers of the animal. Bestial disguise was, of course, a symbolic acquirement of the animal's skills, strength, and agility. In magical practice, it replaces the art of shape-shifting on the mundane level. It induces a particular kind of a trance which allows for moving onto the astral level and for a complete transformation into a beast – a manifestation of one's hidden instincts and lusts. In the case of this Maskim demon, this is a manifestation of atavistic predatory instincts which become awakened by absorption of this dark energy.

The fourth of the Maskim is "a terrible Shibbu." The word "Shibbu" in Akkadian means "serpent." The demon may appear in many forms, but usually it assumes the shape of a horned serpent. A motif of a snake with a pair of horns is often encountered on the Kassite stones called "kudurrus," on Assyrian seals and statues. Such objects had a protective function and were used as magical amulets. The horned serpent in mythology was called "bašmu" and was regarded as a protective symbol. In Sumerian it was called "ušum" or "ušumgallu." The qualities of the Maskim Shibbu, however, seem far from this mythological function. It appears as a shadowy, ghostly spectre, spitting out deadly venom. It coils around the magician and bites him, plunging its teeth into mortal flesh and infecting him with poisonous substance. While the venom flows through the veins, the magician falls into a hallucinogenic trance, and through vapours of greenish smoke, one experiences visions of myriad

serpents and vipers, serpent-people, underground temples with serpent statues, and endless tunnels, writhing and pulsating, as if alive. There one meets the dwellers of the Underworld – half-human, half-serpents, akin to Lilith in her bestial form. There one bathes in a cauldron filled with green venom which induces visions and hallucinations, through which the magician is transformed into a serpent himself, a creature able to crawl between worlds, dimensions and angles. The magical power of this Maskim demon is the art of bestial shape-shifting, this time into a serpent, in a trance of hallucinatory intoxication with the astral venomous *elixir vitae*. The energy of the demon is also very vampiric in its nature and apart from self-initiatory purposes, it could be used in astral vampirism – to poison the victim and drain one's astral energy through the form of this shadowy wraith.

The fifth demon is "a furious wolf who knoweth not to flee." Again, while exploring the nature of this demon, we will easily discover a close relation to astral shape-shifting – this time into a wolf, or a half-wolf. This points at the connection with the concept of lycanthropy, shamanism, nagualism and totem animals. The demon appears as a huge wolf or an anthropomorphic werewolf, with sharp teeth and hard claws. It brings visions of hunting, eating flesh of victims and drinking their fresh, warm blood. The magician may undergo the transformation himself, under the light of the full moon, in severe pain which tears apart the mundane body and releases the soul – the bestial / animal element inherent in human spirit. This concept of a bestial soul is rooted in shamanic beliefs in totem animals, guardian spirits and guides through spiritual realms. In diverse parts of the world it was known as the nagual, or the fylgia, and in witchcraft as the familiar spirit of a witch. Like the leopard demon, the Maskim spirit represents the art of therianthropy, which has a long tradition worldwide, in many cultures and their mythologies, and especially in magical customs. To transform oneself into a desired animal, magicians dressed themselves in animal skins, rubbed their bodies with magic ointments, drank water out of animal's footprints, or used a wide range of magical spells and incantations. It was believed that by these practices one may acquire skills and qualities of the animal. When the transformation and mental identification is complete, one becomes a savage and cruel animal – a werewolf in which all human instincts are replaced by bestial ones. This results in unrestrained freedom on mental and astral level. While working with lycanthropy, the magician may experience a total identification with one's bestial side and perform actions that belong to what exists outside the human world order and social laws. In a form of an astral beast, one may wander around woods and wilderness, tearing apart humans and animals encountered on one's way, in order to satisfy the insatiable primal hunger – the lust for ultimate freedom from all constraints of mundane reality. For this reason in lycanthropy we often find elements of fierce sadism, cannibalism, blood drinking, necrophagia, and even necrophilia. During exploration of this Maskim demon, the magician may also experience a rush of insanity, rage and fury, until complete loss of human consciousness. Yet, a cautious approach to this entity may transform it into a guide and spiritual familiar, as it is in the case of totemic animals.

The sixth demon is a mysterious "rampant ... which marches against god and king." This vague description suggests a force of chaos and disorder, a spirit of rebellion against artificial structures established by humans. The demon itself seems to be very ambiguous and chaotic. It may manifest in consciousness as a strong surge of aggression and energy directed towards destruction. It may also assume hundreds of shapes, but none is stable and each form is continuously changing into another, just within seconds. Sometimes it resembles a tiger, a panther, a werewolf, or simply consists of many animal parts, as if it embodied all beasts at the same time. The demon also has necromantic associations – it may manifest as a destructive force of darkness and death which does not spare anyone – neither kings or gods. As we know from mythological accounts, in Mesopotamia even gods could die – e.g. the first husband of the goddess Ereshkigal, Gugal-Ana, died and later on she married Nergal. There are many other similar examples from the Mesopotamian mythology. Thus, the force of the demon is not only a principle of antinomian rebellion, but also the death which destroys both living beings and human civilizations. It is the beast which tears the sky apart, destroys the divine order and brings a stream of chaos and darkness onto the earth. While working with this demon, the magician may experience chaos and discord entering the mind and manifesting in the mundane life. Yet, it is an essence of antinomian transformation, necessary towards the balance of life and individual divinity.

The seventh and the last of the demons is "a storm, an evil wind which takes vengeance." This spirit reveals a close connection with violent forces of nature: storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, heavy rains, thunders and lightning – with all fierce phenomena which belong to the sphere of air. It may appear to the summoner in a form of a black winged figure, or as an airy serpent with a human-like head and horns. It may also manifest as a destructive power of nature: a violent wind that tears trees out of the ground, collapses buildings, and destroys everything on its way. It enters the temple like a hurricane and lifts the magician onto the dark side of nature. On the astral level the demon might be used for offensive attacks. It raises storms on the astral plane and causes severe damage to the enemy. It may also be used to force a change through the astral level which will manifest in the mundane life. Yet, it is a violent demon, and should be approached carefully.

The number seven in Mesopotamian mythology has a great significance. There were seven protective gods, seven wisemen (apkallū), seven children of the goddess Ishara, seven sons of the god Enmessara (both deities of the Underworld), and we have analogous seven main demons. Magical spells had to be spoken seven times, also ritual customs were performed in this number of times (or seven times seven), seven seals were hanged around the neck of an exorcised person, there were seven gates to the Underworld, the realm of Ereshkigal and Nergal, etc. No wonder that demons were divided into groups of seven: the Galla, the Gigim, and the Maskim demons. As we have already said, the Maskim seem to be primeval entities – the offspring of the god Anu, and an evil / dark counterpart of the seven main gods, who correspond to the constellation of Pleiades. The Maskim exist on both macrocosmic and microcosmic level. They are principles of chaos which act against the divine order: against light, peace, laws, civilization, and other human and god's inventions. But they also represent dark instincts, hidden lusts, savage urges, atavistic and primal – inherent in human spirit, but repressed to the utmost regions of consciousness. On the microcosmic level they represent the antinomian impulses which drive man towards individual isolation and self-deification. They are the hurricane of changes, initiators of dynamics, so essential for the maintenance of cosmic harmony.

Sources:

R.C. Thompson: *Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*
J. Black & A. Green: *Gods, Demons and symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary.*
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