Apotropaic Figurines from Nimrud (Calah) in the Australian Institute of Archaeology Collection

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Abstract: There are two clay figurines in the Australian Institute of Archaeology's collection, which were excavated by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq in the 1953 season at Nimrud (ancient Calah/Kalḫu). The figurines were discovered in the foundations of the Burnt Palace and date approximately to the reign of Adad-nîrârî III (810–783 BCE). Their function was a part of an apotropaic ritual to protect places of residence from evil spirits and enemies. This paper aims to bring to light these figurines in the Institute's collection by offering a descriptive catalogue and an explanation of their use in Assyrian magic for the journal's readership.

The excavation of the Burnt Palace examples [of apotropaic figurines] provided both excitement and entertainment for the dig staff and there was great competition among us to be allowed to open the boxes and remove the row of neat little figures contained within.

Such was the memory of Joan and David Oates (2001: 253 and 255) who, at the time in 1953, were members of Sir Max Mallowan's British School of Archaeology excavation team at Nimrud (ancient Calah). During the excavation, significant numbers of sun-dried clay figurines were discovered in clay boxes interred in the foundations of the royal buildings of the Assyrian political capital of the ninth and eighth centuries BCE (Figure 1).

Two of these clay figurines, together with several other artefacts and cuneiform tablets, made their way to the Australian Institute of Archaeology by way of division; the Institute contributed financially to the excavations (Mallowan 1954: 60; and AIA Docc 5202, and 5403). The two figurines are made from sun-dried clay and still bear their original excavation numbers ND 3311 and ND 3520, and are now registered with the Institute’s numbers IA5.007 and IA5.008, respectively. This article will provide a descriptive catalogue of the figurines and explain the use of these figurines in Assyrian magic.

The apotropaic figurines and Mesopotamian magic

Daniel Schwemer (2015: 29ff) has demonstrated that the use of magic in the Ancient Near East falls into four categories: (a) liminal magic, which is transformative for the recipient of the ritual, enabling entry to the sacred domain; (b) defensive magic, by which an evil being or the threat of it is warded off; (c) aggressive magic, by which the recipient was to become socially and/or politically powerful, or more attractive; and (d) anti-witchcraft rituals. The clay figurines that are the focus of this article are a part of a ritual in the second category whereby the figurines were used to defend people from evil spirits and disease in their homes or, in this case, palaces. At Nimrud, the clay figurines were found interred in clay boxes in the corners of rooms in the royal buildings of the Burnt Palace, the E-zida Temple, and Fort Shalmaneser (Oates and Oates 2001: 253–254). Similar styles of foundation deposits have been excavated in Ashur, Nineveh, Dur-Sharrukin, Tell al-Rimah, Babylon, Borsippa, Kish, and Ur (Rittig 1977).

The figurines studied here are just two of the different types used in Assyria and Babylonia during the first millennium BCE. In addition to the apkallu-sage with bird features and the laḫmu-spirit in the Institute’s collection (see below), another common apotropaic figurines of apkallu-sages which were anthropomorphic and adorned in fish-cloaks that covered them from head to toe. These protective entities were also sculpted on plaques with a similar function. Model dogs have also been recovered from Assyrian palatial complexes. These were deposited in sets of five and inscribed with names that reflect their job: ‘Expeller of Evil!’; ‘Catcher of the Enemy!’; ‘Don’t think, bite!’; ‘Biter of his foe!’; and ‘Loud is his bark!’ (Green 1995: 116–117).

Figure 1: A photograph of the Nimrud figurines in situ, from Mallowan 1954: pl. 20.
While scholarly consensus is not totally agreed, these apotropaic figures are most likely the same well-known mythical creatures displayed on the walls of the palaces and related to the winged bulls that adorn the major entrances. Indeed, an inscription from the same period as the figurines studied here by Šamš-ili, an Assyrian official and field marshal, strongly supports this interpretation. The inscription was inscribed on two colossal stone lions placed at the Assyrian palace at Til Barsip, renamed Kār-Shalmaneser, modern Tell Ahmar in Syria (Figure 3), and ends with an elaborate version of the brief labels on the model dogs:

At that time I erected two lofty lions at the right and left of the gate of Kār-Shalmaneser, my lordly city and I named them (as follows). The name of the first is: “The lion who [...], angry, demon, unrivalled attack, who overwhelms the insubmissive, who brings success.” The name of the second, which stands before the gate, is: “Who charges through battle, who flattens the enemy land, who expels criminals and brings in good people.” A.0.104.2010: 19–24, in Grayson 1996: 233.
Fortunately, our understanding of the procedure and purpose of the figurines is aided by cuneiform texts that describe the interment rituals. The two main sources are the text known as *Šēp lemutti ina bit amēli parāsu* ‘To block the entry of the enemy in someone’s house’ (hereafter *Šēp lemutti*), and an excerpt from this text written by the renowned exorcist, Kiṣir-Ashur, who worked in the Temple of Ashur in the Assyrian capital (Figure 4). The following comments are based on F. A. M. Wiggermann’s (1992) edition and commentary on the cuneiform texts.

The main text outlines the five-day procedure for protecting households from evil by fashioning groups of statues from wood and clay, and performing incantations and purification rituals in the woods, the river, and the city. On the final day, the afflicted house is purified and the figurines are buried to ensure continued protection from maladies. Of interest to this study of the two clay figurines in the Institute’s collection are ll. 170–174 and 184–185 of *Šēp lemutti*, which describe the fashioning of figurines like IA5.008 and IA5.007, respectively:

*Šēp lemutti* ll. 170 – 174 (after Wiggerman 1992: 15)

You shall make seven statues of sages (apkallē) whose clay is [mixed] with [wax,] furnished with [wings] and the face of a bird, holding in their right hands a cl[eaner,] in their left hands a bucket; they are clad in white paste, and endowed with feathers by hatchings in the wet paste...

A comparison with IA5.008 shows resemblance with the sages described to be bird-like (see Figure 2). Further, Mallowan stated in his report that this figurine was found in a group of seven in a corner of Room 9 of the Burnt Palace (Mallowan 1954: 93).
In the case of IA5.007, scholars have connected these types of figurines with the *laḫmu* of the same text:

You shall make two statues of ['hairies' (*laḫmē*) clad] in white paste and w[ater drawn on in black paste]...

*Sēp lemutti* ll. 184–185 (after Wiggerman 1992: 15)

*A laḫmu* was a minor god associated with Ea (Sumerian Enki) who dwelt in the Apsû, the sweet subterranean sea (Green 1995: 113). *Sēp lemutti* l. 144 describes the figurines generally as ‘creatures of the Apsû,’ (*bi-nu-ut ABZU*). Typically, a *laḫmu* was to have six spiral tresses at the end of their long hair, hence the translation ‘hairies’. However, at Nimrud many *laḫmus* such as IA5.007 did not have this last feature. Like our figurine, *lahmē* are often depicted holding a *marru*-spade or hoe (Green 1983: 91–92). While the ritual text indicates that *laḫmus* were fashioned in pairs, the Nimrud excavations found them deposited singly in the corners of rooms.

The reason for selecting these ‘creatures of the Apsû’ for warding off maladies is not a settled matter. A most plausible suggestion is that their sagacity and connection to the domain of Ea, the god of wisdom, magic and incantations, made them appropriate for exorcists’ practice. Their presence might well have made manifest Ea’s wisdom on the one hand and formed a physical connection between the afflicted space and that of the cosmological Apsû thereby protecting the quarters through a comics association with the Apsû (cf. Green 1983; Nakamura 2004).

**Descriptive Catalogue**

The two clay figurines in the Institute’s collection are complete, but do have superficial damage that has affected their finer features, particularly the faces of each. In the case of IA5.008 (ND 3520) putty has been used to fill in parts of the figurine that have broken away. This same practice of filling in damaged parts of clay objects is also found on some of the cuneiform tablets in the Institute’s collection. It is uncertain when the putty was applied to the artifacts.

**IA5.007 (ND 3311)**

IA5.007, Figure 5, is complete with some damage to the front and back of the upper portion of the figurine. The figurine is made from brown clay and measures 140x47x27. There are traces of the white paste on the upper part of the body, which matches the description of the ritual process in *Sēp lemutti*, but no traces of the black paste that once would have been on the back.

As noted above, this is a figurine of a *laḫmu* holding a *marru*-spade or hoe and it is included in Rittig’s catalogue as 3.2.28 (1977: 65). The figurine is uninscribed and does not have the long tresses, which is typical of the *laḫmus* from the Burnt Palace. This figurine was discovered in a foundation deposit box in a room of the Burnt Palace, which dates it to the reign of Adad-nûrārî III (810–783 BCE).
Figure 6: Photographs of IA5:008. Views are front, right-side, back, and left-side. Dimensions 140x86x37.

IA5.008 (ND 3520)

IA5.008, Figures 6 & 7, is complete with some damage to the head and outer edge of the right wing. The figurine is made from brown clay and measures 140x86x37. There are traces of the white paste mentioned in the ritual text on this figurine, but there is no evidence of black or red paint that might have been applied to the wings. A photograph of this figurine was published in Mallowan’s excavation report in the journal, *Iraq* (1954: pls 17–18, top-right corner of both plates). It also appears in Rittig’s catalogue as 5.2.3 (1977: 71).

The figurine is of the *apkallu*-sage type, anthropomorphic in shape with a bird-head and four out-spread wings. As described in the ritual text *Šēp lemutti*, the figurine carries a bucket in its left hand and a “cleaner” (item for ritual cleansing) in its right. This figurine was a part of one of the septenary sets discovered in a clay deposit box in a corner of Room 9 in the Burnt Palace. The accompanying figurines are registered as ND 3518–3519 and 3521–3524 (Mallowan 1954: 93; and Green 1983: 88, fn. 8). This dates the figurine to the reign of Adad-nirari III (810–783 BCE).

Figure 7: A drawing of IA5:008.

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Endnotes
1 David Oates would become Director of excavations at Nimrud from 1958–1962, and then went on to many other sites. Similarly, Joan Oates was to be involved in many excavations across Iraq and Syria, most notably she co-directed the Tell Brak digs from 1988–2004, and upon David Oates’ death in 2004 she became the sole director.