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The Phenomenon of God-nap in Ancient Mesopotamia

A Short Introduction

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My current research examines the phenomenon of God-nap in Ancient Mesopotamia. God-nap is literally the kidnap of the statue of a god. When armies invaded, they, naturally, took everything of value and destroyed all else. In some cases, the statues of the gods were taken along with all other goods back home with them. In order to more fully understand why this was such a grievous action, a short history of Mesopotamian religion and the role of the cult statue need to be explored first.

A concise history of Mesopotamian religion is hard to construct from the beginning, as different areas had different pantheons. Each pantheon had at its head a god that was most important for the region; the marsh areas had the god of fresh waters as head of the pantheon, the agricultural areas had a god associated with the underworld and death and rebirth.¹ As cities grew, and encompassed smaller villages and regions, gods which had the same function became encapsulated into one god. This, along with the Sumerians' love of list-making,² necessitated god-lists. These lists of gods sometimes recorded gods with similar functions as aspects of one god. For example, Asalluḫi would be identified with Marduk in association with magic. With the early unification of Mesopotamian cities, this practice helped to somewhat make one central pantheon clear. After the unification of Mesopotamia under Ḫammurabi and the subsequent First Dynasty of Babylon, a true national pantheon arises. Though there are still disagreements on who the head of the pantheon should be, the major gods had their cult centres and their identities established. The nature of this city-centred religion follows the pattern of most polytheistic religions in that everyone knows there is a head of the pantheon, and gives him due worship, but they still treasure their city god above all others. For example, the residents of Eridu

¹ Jacobsen 1970: 16-38.

² Taylor 2001: 472.

worship Marduk as the king of the gods, but have slightly greater reverence for Ea, whose cult centre is in their city, but only slightly greater because they would not want to anger Marduk.

The most important feature of Mesopotamian cult was the cult statue. Understanding how the Ancient Mesopotamians thought of the statue and how they fashioned them is central to understanding the nature of their religion itself. They thought of their gods as active, thinking, and sensitive personalities; the gods were given anthropomorphic form based on these human characteristics.³ Statues were made out of an inner core of wood, plated with metal and possibly precious stones or substances; it is not known for certain what these statues looked like because none survive.⁴ When describing how a statue was made, the word for human birth was often used, thus, a statue was not merely made out of the stone or wood it was carved from, but was the god himself. Furthermore, the *Mīs pi*, or Washing of the Mouth, ritual was performed in order to imbue the statue with the spirit of the god.⁵ Once the statue was imbued with the essence of the god, it ceased to be a statue, and was seen as the embodiment of the god. This concept can be seen in certain genres of literature as the statues of the gods are referred to only as gods, not statues.

Effort was made to ensure new statues accurately represented the old ones as well as the god; this way the appearance of the god was traditional and conservative.⁶ When a new statue needed to be made, the god himself had to initiate the construction of it and approve its design. In an interesting case, the Temple of Šamaš had to wait around 150 years for the god to reveal a replica of the statue before they could fashion a new one.⁷ Deities seem to have been allowed to abandon their statues if they no longer approved of their appearance. For instance, in the Erra Epic,⁸ the trickster god Erra convinces Marduk to leave his statue because it is in

³ Berlejung 1998: 35.

⁴ Berlejung 1998: 36-38.

⁵ Walker and Dick 2001: 7.

⁶ Berlejung 1998: 45-46.

⁷ Walker and Dick 2001: 8.

⁸ Walker and Dick 2001: 7.

need of repair. Marduk falls for Erra's trap and when he leaves his statue Erra is free to wreak havoc. There is also mention of Marduk becoming angry with Babylon and leaving his temple in an inscription of Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king. After Marduk leaves, the whole community becomes a wasteland and the inhabitants are forced into slavery. The threat of destruction and ruin at the departure of the god was very real and early on was incorporated into literature.

Although no statues survive to present day, depictions on cylinder seals and reliefs can give clues as to what they did look like. These scenes of cult practice are not extremely helpful since it is impossible to determine if the central figure pictured is a depiction of the god himself or merely the statue. Though the god was considered to be embodied in the statue, the relief could be showing the god on his own without showing the statue. Clues for deciphering which gods were depicted are left in the form of labels or special symbols. Gods are recognised by their horned crowns and sometimes carry particular objects, wear special clothing, or are near certain animals.⁹ For example, the symbol of the spade was associated with Marduk and can be seen near depictions of him. These symbols of the gods could also be used to represent the god on reliefs or on *kudurrus*, boundary stones, when not depicted in anthropomorphic form. Statues were even given meals at the appropriate times of day, as the gods needed nourishment to survive. The statues of the gods held great importance in that they were the representation, in a very physical sense, of the god in the temple and gave worshippers the feeling they were in the presence of the god.

The belief that the gods were anthropomorphic did not govern religious thought until close to the end of the third millennium.¹⁰ The earlier, non-anthropomorphic forms of the gods tended to stay with them, but as divine emblems; for example, a sun disk being depicted near the Sumerian Utu, the sun god. Throughout the development of Mesopotamian religion different gods headed the pantheon. One constant remained though, each god had his/her patron city and primary worship was set up there. For example, Šamaš/Utu was worshipped in Sippar with his temple, the Ebabbar,

⁹ Berlejung 1998: 36.

¹⁰ Walker and Dick 2001: 5.

situated there. The gods were not only worshipped in the city of their patronage; they had shrines in the temples of other gods. They were usually placed in a temple of a god they were related to in some way; so Marduk was often worshipped in the temple of Nabû, his son.

One might ask why kings would bother taking the statues of the gods? The reason is fairly straightforward. Once you have taken away all the goods and people of a city, it is only one step more to completely demoralise the inhabitants by taking their gods. The people will feel abandoned by their gods. They would wonder if they had done something to bring this about and if they would ever be back in the gods' favour. This theft also shows the conquered that their conquerors have power over not just the people, but their gods as well.

After a systematic reading of the Assyrian Annals, a collection of royal inscriptions from palace walls and various stelae, I have discovered that the trend of taking the statue or statues of a people's gods seems to begin with the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I at the end of the eleventh century and beginning of the tenth century BC. The Assyrian Annals are the most abundant source of references to god-nap. The use of the gods as political tools is mentioned in three main ways: the taking of unnamed gods, the taking of specific gods and the destruction of a god.

The effect of god-nap would be greatest if the god stolen was a high ranking one or even the head of the pantheon. Most of the references to the gods taken are just DINGIR.MEŠ (gods). Since most of the mentions of god-nap only say that the gods were taken and not any specific god we cannot say exactly what affect this had on the people. Certainly if any of their gods were stolen it would be disheartening, but would it be more so if the gods taken were more important than other gods? It follows that the greatest loss would be that of the god whose cult centre was in that city. It is possible that the names of the gods are not mentioned because the Assyrians did not think they were important enough to garner such attention since they were often raiding cities on the periphery of Assyria.

In reading the annals, I have come across few mentions of specific gods other than Marduk. The gods Haldia and Bagbartum are mentioned in Sargon II's campaign against Musasir in an inscription on wall slabs from his capital Khorsabad.¹¹ The reason for this specific naming of the gods is unclear. The names of the gods would likely not be unfamiliar to Mesopotamians so naming them must have another purpose. If these gods were the 'Marduk and Šarpanitum', the head of the pantheon and his consort, of the people of Musasir it makes sense to name them because they were important gods. Another reason for naming them would be that the king had feared these gods and by proclaiming to the world that he had taken them specifically he is saying that he is no longer afraid of them and they are under his control now.

In an inscription known as the Bavian Inscription, Sennacherib (King of Assyria, 704-681 BC) marches to Babylon and destroys the statues of the gods: 'The gods dwelling therein, - the hands of my people took them, and they smashed them.'¹² He attributes this act not to himself, but his troops. This is interesting because in the rest of the narrative he is the one performing all the actions. He must have some reason to not directly associate himself with the destruction of the gods of Babylon. But if these gods were so important why did he let his troops destroy them? This destruction does not seem to be a manipulative act, but he focuses on the fact that he himself is afraid to hurt the gods and incur their wrath. This could have something to do with curses that were attached to the destruction of precious objects. On all major (and sometimes minor) inscriptions a curse would be placed on any person who would destroy it or not keep up with its maintenance. It can be assumed the destruction of these gods would be in very bad taste, as well as not being a practical tool for manipulation. Sennacherib separates himself from direct destruction of the gods in order to be able to stay a pious king. The destruction of the statues represents the destruction of the gods themselves and a king would not want to be directly involved in such an act. Since the taking of the statues does not involve

¹¹ Luckenbill 1968: 30.

¹² Luckenbill 1968: 152.

destruction, only relocation, it is a less grievous offense; if the statues were not destroyed they also had the possibility of being restored to their rightful places.

Another use of the statues of the gods as political tools is the act of returning them. Some of the later inscriptions of the annals mention the return of the statues of various gods. An inscription of Esarhaddon, discussing the previous capture of the gods of Arabia, details these Arabian gods being sent back with their leader after having completed their enforced exile in Assyria.¹³ This Arabian region seems to now please the king, so as a reward he returns their gods. The return of other statues could show that later kings were concerned with the actions of their ancestors and wanted to right old wrongs. Some kings do mention that they are restoring certain cities to their former glories by returning the gods and re-building their shrines; these kings take credit for their work, but the focus is on the restoration of the city, not the great deeds of the king. This altruistic interpretation is most likely not accurate as in other texts kings take pride in being the one to return the statues and use these acts to glorify themselves.

The phenomenon of god-nap in the Ancient Near East differs from other forms of political manipulation in a very physical sense. The statue of the god was taken and sometimes returned in order to control certain peoples. This act also affected religious practices as festivals could not be carried out when the statue was away and the people would have felt that they had no religious figure to turn to. This kidnapping of the gods was used as a political tool, subjugating various cities to Assyrian rule, but the effectiveness of this tool has yet to be measured.

¹³ Luckenbill 1968: 207-208.

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