Introduction

The written remains of ancient Mesopotamia preserve a partial record of the life and thought of that civilization, a record composed of documents of diverse forms and varied concerns. A significant portion of these documents constitutes a rich and complex magical and medical literature. This literature, which is part of the mainstream of the Mesopotamian cultural tradition, comprises descriptions of symptoms, diagnoses, ritual and medical prescriptions, incantations, and prayers, and is recorded in a variety of formally distinct textual types. In modern terms, the magical and medical texts describe the beliefs and behavior associated with pathological disorders, personal and social crises, and culturally determined anxieties of the individual, and they prescribe the self-administered and professionally-administered measures undertaken to restore the afflicted individual to a normal life. These texts reflect suffering, fears, and anxieties common to all men, and are among the most important sources for our knowledge of the personal and religious life of the ancient Mesopotamian.

Although much progress has been made as a result of the work of a small number of devoted scholars, the study of this branch of cuneiform literature is still in its infancy, and much remains to be done in the areas of publication, systematization, and interpretation of the texts. Because of the size and complexity of the materials, significant advances can best be made by the intensive study of topically related segments of the magical and medical corpus. This procedure is far from new, and several segments of the corpus have already been investigated. However, although there has been a growing realization—since the pioneering works of Evans-Pritchard and Kluckhohn—of the importance of the role of witchcraft in the cultural and social life of many primitive and western societies, no comprehensive study of the Mesopotamian texts which deal with witchcraft has been attempted. This lack is surprising in view of the existence of a large number of relevant cuneiform texts, some of which have been known since almost the beginning of cuneiform studies, and of the mention of witchcraft in a number of general works on Mesopotamian religion, magic, and literature.
Accordingly, in the spring of 1968, we undertook the study of that segment of the Mesopotamian magical and medical corpus which deals with witchcraft. This project has consisted in (1) the collection of all Sumerian and Akkadian texts in which witchcraft plays a role, to which end all of the magical and medical texts previously published as well as Geers’ copies of several thousand unpublished British Museum tablets have been examined, and (2) the systematization and analysis of the texts for the purposes of tracing their history and ascertaining their meaning and of reconstructing Mesopotamian beliefs and behavior relating to witchcraft. In view of the richness both in quality and in quantity of the materials, it is not surprising that this investigation has resulted in a number of new finds, some of which have already been presented in several papers to the American Oriental Society, communicated to the authorities of the British Museum, and shared with interested colleagues in the field. While this is not the place to summarize all these finds, two results should be mentioned here, though they will be presented in detail and substantiated elsewhere.

During the preparation, for eventual publication, of an edition of the textual materials which form the witchcraft corpus, many new texts, duplicates, and joins were identified, and, thereby, new compositions were discovered and previously known ones were either wholly or partially restored or provided with a fuller collection of variants. In this context, the importance of the Geers collection should be emphasized.

The single most important result of the investigation, however, has been registered not in the area of text publication, but in that of interpretation. The ritual and incantation series Maqlû, which series was edited originally by Tallqvist and more recently by Meier, still remains the single most important source for the study of Mesopotamian witchcraft. In the course of an intensive examination of Maqlû, it was found that this series, far from being a collection of incantations brought together because of a common theme, represents a consecutive and unified ceremony whose incantations were recited and whose rituals were performed in the order given in the series, and that the ritual tablet of the series, far from being a simple catalog, is the manual for the complete ceremony. As a long and
complex ceremony, *Maqlû* is divided into three major parts. These three divisions, each of which displays an inner unity and is definable on the basis of internal and formal criteria, were performed in sequence: the first two being performed during the night and the third during the following morning. These divisions are tablets I-V, VI-VII 57, and VII 58-VIII.

The length and complexity of the series are due to a number of changes introduced into the ceremony in the course of its evolution and to the accompanying developments in the body of the text. The stages of growth of *Maqlû* can still be traced, and the series can be shown to have originated in a short sequence of ten incantations. Contrary to previous opinion, the *Maqlû* incantations which are listed by incipit in *BBR* 26 V and in *PBS* 1/1 13 rev. // K 15234 + 16344 (confirmed) are not an extract from the “canonical” *Maqlû*; rather they constitute the historical nucleus out of which tablets I-V, the oldest division in the series, emerged through a conscious process of adaptation, repatterning, and expansion.

While the short original version and the expanded final version of I-V differ from each other in respect to size and time of performance (the former was performed in the morning), the basic pattern underlying the short version is retained in the expanded version and remains operative there in most of its essentials. This is especially fortunate, for, whereas the pattern underlying the final version is obscured by the length, repetitiveness, and apparent complexity of that version, that underlying the original version is rendered conspicuous by the very brevity of that version, and, consequently, the identification of the pattern underlying the short version facilitates the isolation of that underlying the final version and the definition of its meaning.

The pattern underlying the short version may, in summary form, be reconstructed as follows:

1. The first part, which is composed of three incantations, centers on the judgment and execution of the witch. The plaintiff addresses Šamaš, identifies the witches, who are represented by statues, as the culprits who have harmed him, and asks Šamaš to order their execution by fire. He then turns to Nusku, who, as watchman, has guarded him against that witchcraft which was sent during the night,
and asks him to cause that witchcraft to turn back and attack those
who originally sent it.

(2) The second part, which is somewhat more difficult to recon­
struct because of the damaged state of all three of its incantations
and rituals, seems to center on the release of witchcraft through the
untying of knots, on protection against future attack, and on purifi­
cation. The ritual of the third incantation prescribes the placing of
a cornel branch in the heart of the witch, which action represents a
further stage in her execution.

(3) The third part centers on the transformation of the witch into
a ghost and on its expulsion. After having been burned and impaled,
the smoldering statue is drenched with water. The drenching serves
to extinguish any remaining spark of life and malicious impulse in
the witch, who is, thereby, finally and irrevocably killed, divested of
all corporeal form, and turned into a ghost. After the ghost has been
pacified, the speaker expresses the wish that the mountain, which,
in some way, represents death, confine it. He then commands the
witch’s ghost to be gone and never return, thus expelling it from the
world of the living. On this note the original ritual ended.

The expulsion of the witch’s ghost, a theme which is crucial for
an understanding of Maqlû, is bound up with the calendrical setting
of the series. It is virtually certain that at least the final version
of Maqlû was performed in the month of Abû, probably during the
period of the disappearance of the moon at the end of that month.
Maqlû was performed in Abû because of the cultic-calendrical associ­
atation of that month with Gilgamesh in his netherworld capacity and
with the appearance of ghosts and their return to the netherworld.

It is, however, neither to our general edition and treatment of
the body of texts which constitute the witchcraft corpus nor to our
study of the nature, history, structure, ritual, and calendrical setting
of Maqlû that the studies in this volume are devoted. It seems to us
that a somewhat more immediate and pressing need would perhaps
be served by an exposition in case-study form of what we believe to
be a productive approach to the materials.

Students of Mesopotamian magical literature will surely agree
that this branch of cuneiform studies, perhaps more than any other,
is in a chaotic state and is, in a profound sense, terra incognita.
Introduction

While it cannot be denied that the difficulties inherent in this type of literature, the imposing mass and complexity of these materials, the nature of their organization in antiquity, and their state of preservation and publication in modern times have been contributing factors, it seems to us that the main cause of this situation is to be sought elsewhere. The study of this literature has suffered from the absence of sympathy for and the presence of antipathy to the magical literature. These sentiments are due, in large measure, to the belief that these texts are not internally coherent and do not express a logical and meaningful pattern of thought. This belief, especially when operating in the study of the very genres most alien to the modern scholar and most prone to expansion, revision, and corruption, can have only one outcome: as a self-fulfilling prophecy, it sounds the death knell of the philological enterprise. The only way in which we fulfill our responsibility as philologists is by assuming that the magical texts do make sense. However, we shall find that sense neither by demanding that the texts speak for themselves nor by according them a false respect cast in the mold of literalism, but rather by approaching them with sympathetic imagination and educated common sense, on the one hand, and strict logic and rigorous criticism, on the other.

The studies herewith presented are predicated on the assumption that the magical texts do make sense, and they have as their main purpose the transformation of that assumption into a self-evident truth. The first study is devoted to an examination of several incantations and prayers which presently display an inordinate number of illogicalities. By the application of several different modes of critical analysis, an attempt is made to demonstrate that these compositions were originally coherent and that their illogicalities first emerged as a result of changes introduced into these compositions in the course of their development. The second study, by way of contrast, is primarily concerned with one incantation and is essentially interpretive. By the probing of the details of this incantation, an attempt is made to discern and to understand the internal logic and the full range of meaning of the incantation.
Although the author is all too certain that some of his arguments and conclusions will turn out to be mistaken, he presents these studies in the hope of having shown that where we do not understand the texts, the failing lies with us and not with the ancients.