In ancient Mesopotamia, the happiness of the dead in the Netherworld was dependent upon a continuous series of funerary offerings provided by their surviving relatives. Moreover, ghosts periodically left their homes in the world below to come back for visits during the course of which they expected to receive entertainment from the living. What interests us here about these festivals is that they also provided an occasion for private rituals in which opportunistic use was made of the fact that the ghosts had to return to the Netherworld at the end of their formal visits. The roads between the worlds being opened to receive the returning dead, what better opportunity could one find to rid oneself of one’s illnesses or other personal problems?

The month of Abu (roughly August in our calendar) was the occasion for one such general return of the dead, and it provided an appropriate setting for the following ritual designed to cure an unspecified ghost-induced illness. "If the ghost of a man’s father or mother keeps seizing him, on the 27th of Abu, you take clay from a potter’s pit. You make a figurine of a man and a woman. You put a reed (made) of gold on the male figurine. You put a [st]aff (var. ears) (made) of gold on the female figurine. You thread carnelian (var. lapis) on red wool. You put it on her (the female figurine’s) neck. You abundantly fit them (the figurines) out. You honor them; you treat them with care. You seat those figurines at the head of the patient for three days. You pour out hot broth for them. On the third day, the 29th, when the ghosts are (customarily) provided with food offerings, you make a sailboat. You assign (them) their travel provisions. You present them to

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1 For more details on this subject, see A. Tsukimoto, Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im alten Mesopotamien, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 216 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985).

Šamaš. You make them face downstream and you say as follows: 'From the body of NN, son of NN, be 3,600 double-hours distant, be far away, be distant, be distant. You are made to swear (this) by the great gods.'

The manufacture of both male and female figurines is a relatively common feature of ancient Mesopotamian magic, the object being to ensure results in cases where the real perpetrator of the offense (sometimes a ghost but more usually a sorcerer) was unknown to the victim. Placing the figurines at the head of the patient for three days drew away the illness which was being combated so that it could be sent, along with the figurines, down river to the Netherworld. The presentation to the sun-god Šamaš was more than a simple exposure of the figurines to sunlight. By virtue of his journey through the heavens, the sun-god was the divine judge of the upper and lower worlds in whose court were adjudicated cases which arose between living persons and their dead relatives over the performance of funerary offerings. By involving Šamaš in such offerings, the living ensured that the ghostly recipients could not later complain to the god about being neglected (a legitimate grounds for ghost-induced illness). The final oath administered to the ghosts is another common element in ancient Mesopotamian magical rites, the object being to establish a sort of quasi-contract between the patient and the afflicting spirit. The acceptance of a conditional offering by a ghost or demon obligated him to go away and leave the patient alone in the same way that the

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4 For references to “unknown” assailants in ghost-expelling texts, see, for example: “Šamš, the evil ghost whom you know but (whom) I do not know shall not approach me; he shall not come near me, he shall not come close to me; keep him from coming” (CT 23.15-22+ i 53'-54'//KAR 21:r. 2-4//K 3576:9-10 (= Scurlock, MMDG no. 16)); “I, NN, son of NN, whose personal god is NN (and) whose personal goddess is NN, who is sick with illness; and you, O god, know (what it is) but I do not know (it) and nobody (else) knows (it)” (KAR 32:37-39//K 9175:9'-11' (= Scurlock, MMDG no. 67)).

5 Note, for example: “He whom an utukku has seized (or) a ghost has seized, etc. . . . to save him from (them) (lies) with Šamas. For the ghost to . . . to assemble the [family] ghost(s) from the Netherworld, to have a true judgement taken in order for the dead not to oppress the living, to calm the angry ghost, to separate the dead from the living, to return [him to the Netherworld (?)], to loosen his wrath, to keep away his ghost (lies) with Šamas” (E. von Weiher, Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk 3, Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft in Uruk-Warka 12 [Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1988], no. 67 ii 27-28, 37-46).