1. ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS

Nabû-eriba, a court-official of fairly high rank active during the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon, had suddenly fallen ill. He was tormented by unrelenting headache and neck pain, experienced vertigo, suffered from insomnia, lost his appetite and grew weaker by the day. Soon he was bedridden, and his limbs started to fail him. Even before his illness Nabû-eriba’s life had not been untroubled. His attempts to place his son in a favourable position at court had met with hostility, and his own reputation had been tarnished by accusations levelled against him by one of his many rivals for the favour of the royal family. Inevitably, this recent decline in his fortunes weighed even heavier on him when his unwonted lack of success was compounded by what appeared to be a severe illness.

When Nabû-eriba’s condition continued to deteriorate and an extispicy performed on his behalf produced unfavourable signs, an āšipu (‘exorcist’) was called in. His family hoped that this healing expert, who was trained to treat severe illnesses by the performance of rituals and the application of drugs in various forms, would be able to determine the cause of their patriarch’s suffering and recommend a suitable cure. After examining Nabû-eriba’s symptoms and being informed of his recent disappointments, the āšipu confirmed that the patient’s condition was serious and was probably caused by some form of kišpū (‘witchcraft’) that had been brought about either by evil rituals performed against the patient or by manipulated substances that the victim had unknowingly ingested with food or drink. In short, Nabû-eriba probably suffered from a witchcraft-induced disease, and his cure required the performance of an anti-witchcraft ritual which could, if necessary, be supplemented by the administration of a potion or salve containing drugs that had previously been shown to be effective against this kind of witchcraft-induced suffering. The exorcist determined the next New Moon as an auspicious day for the performance of the ritual. The proceedings would be carried out at sunrise, when Šamaš, the sun-god and divine judge, rose from the netherworld and crossed the mountains to the east of Mesopotamia to start his daily journey across the sky.

During the night prior to the appointed day the ritual paraphernalia were set up on the flat roof of Nabû-eriba’s house. To begin with, the exorcist purified
the area by sweeping the floor and sprinkling it with pure water. Then he set up an offering table, a censer and a crucible; next to the latter he put a small bowl with burning sulphur. A whole set of small anthropomorphic male and female figurines made of various materials such as tallow, wax, dough, clay and bitumen was arranged in pairs alongside the crucible. Shortly before sunrise, Nabû-eriba was helped to the roof to join the exorcist for the performance of the ritual. The exorcist placed a portion of emmer bread on the offering table, strewed the glowing acacia charcoal in the censer with juniper incense and libated beer for the rising sun-god. Next he loaded the crucible with fast-kindling poplar twigs and bound the hands and feet of the figurines with string. Then he lit a torch in the sulphur fire and, reciting the short standard incantation beginning with the words “I raise the torch”, he lit the fire in the crucible with the torch. Once the fire in the crucible was burning, the exorcist put the figurines into the blaze and, taking Nabû-eriba by the hand, he recited three times on his patient’s behalf an extensive prayer addressed to Šamaš. The prayer, which had a fixed text and formed a standard part of the ritual, praised Šamaš as the divine judge and lord of justice, presented the figurines as representations of the evil warlock and witch, described the witches’ evil activities against the patient at some length and, most importantly, asked that the witchcraft be returned to the evil-doers, thereby reversing the unjust verdict imposed on Nabû-eriba and inflicting his evil fate on those who had caused it by practising witchcraft against him. When the figurines had been burnt — the wax, tallow and bitumen melted, the clay burst, the dough was charred — and the symbolic destruction of the witches had thus been accomplished, the exorcist extinguished the fire, reciting a standard incantation that focused on the transfer of his impurity to the sorcerers. This rite marked the end of the ritual. Nabû-eriba had been purified, and the witchcraft affecting him had been returned to its initiator(s) whose figurines the fire had destroyed. It was left to the exorcist to dispose of the burnt remains by throwing them into a river or by taking them out of the city to an uninhabited place in the ‘steppe’.

To the great relief of the patient and his family, the evil witchcraft had been repelled. Subsequent to the performance of the ritual, the patient’s condition was found much improved, though some of the symptoms persisted even after a potion against witchcraft had been drunk. The unexpected installation of Nabû-eriba’s son in a promising position at court was generally interpreted as a sign of the ritual’s success. When Nabû-eriba died two months later, it was a sad occasion, but his death was not interpreted as the result of a sorcerous attack by ill-wishing fellow-humans — this danger had been removed by the performance of the anti-witchcraft ritual two months earlier.

Nabû-eriba, of course, is an invented figure, and his story, while inspired by surviving anti-witchcraft rituals such as those edited here as texts 8.3 and 8.4, was conceived by the authors of the present lines in an attempt to imagine what kind of cases a time-traveling anthropologist would encounter if he were to study ancient Mesopotamian witchcraft beliefs in a seventh-century BC Neo-Assyrian city like Nineveh. While studies of contemporary witchcraft beliefs can rely on first-hand observation and on interviews with patients, their relatives and healing experts, the student of the ideas associated with witchcraft in ancient Babylonia and Assyria has to base his conclusions on fragmentarily preserved cuneiform texts. Some of these, especially letters and legal documents, provide an almost immediate glimpse of cases of witchcraft suspicions and accusations and of the practice of the āšipu and other experts who could be consulted when someone had fallen seriously ill or witchcraft was perceived to be an imminent threat. But the bulk of our sources is formed by the corpus of the technical literature of the exorcist, the lore of āšipurru, an extensive body of traditional texts that provides a wealth of information, but, unfortunately, contains not one actual case description. Nevertheless, the rituals and prescriptions used by the āšipu and the recipes for remedies administered by his colleague the physician (asû) form our most important source of information on Mesopotamian witchcraft beliefs, and the goal of the Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals is to provide Assyriologists and students of magic and witchcraft generally with reliable editions of these all too often fragmentary sources. It is our hope that these editions will further stimulate the study of the various aspects of Mesopotamian magic and serve as a useful basis for future comparative research.

2. The Nature of Witchcraft

Akkadian kišpā “witchcraft” designates both the evil actions performed by the witch and the resulting evil which takes possession of the patient, makes him impure and binds him. The witchcraft