19 The witch

People believed that illness or death could be explained as a consequence of witchcraft. When medical texts give it as the cause of illness they refer to it as 'the hand of man', even though in most cases the witch was a woman. Law-books usually claim it was a man who was responsible, but that is because the terminology used in the laws only takes the man into account. In the handbook against witchcraft, *Maqlû*, both wizards and witches are addressed to cover all eventualities. Nevertheless, ordinary people imagined the perpetrator to be a woman, and the Neo-Babylonian laws say that a woman is concerned with witchcraft (§ 7). It is dealt with in § 47 of the Middle Assyrian laws, in the same section as other regulations referring to women, though there provision is made for it to be initiated by 'either a man or a woman'. The penalty for this crime was always death. One liver extispicy gave this prediction:

> A witch will keep collecting dust from a man's foot. They will seize her and put her to death.[1]

In the oldest laws of Israel we read,

> You must not allow a witch to live (Exodus 22:18).

Actual examples of witchcraft are sometimes referred to in letters and always concern women.[2] On one occasion seven witches were responsible, and a letter says that 'many' were sent to the king. A woman who 'had given a drink to the son of her husband and killed him' was accused of being a witch.[3]

Making women everywhere generally responsible for practising witchcraft exposes a widespread prejudice against women. Rabbi Hillel says on this subject in the Mishnah,

> Much meat, many worms. Many possessions, much worry (variant: lawsuits). Many maids, much fornication. Many servants, much theft. Many women, much witchcraft (Aboth II, 7).

The reason why women were seen as witches in all cultures reflects the social inequality between the sexes. The position of the woman was marginalised and

1 A. R. George, CUSAS 18 (2012) 234:28.

2 Y. Sefati, J. Klein, 'The role of women in Mesopotamian witchcraft', CRRAI 47/II (2002) 569–587; D. Schwemer, *Abwehrzauber und Behexung. Studien zum Schadenzauberglauben im alten Mesopotamien* (2007) 118–127. More: *ibidem*, p. 140–146, 161–163.

3 Schwemer, 125–127.

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there was prejudice against her.[4] Witches were mostly supposed to be older women, dominant individuals, women who took the initiative. They no longer needed to behave as subordinates.[5] Another modern theory is that anyone plotting evil would consult women skilled in witchcraft.[6]

A Sumerian legend concerning Enmerkar and Ensuḫkešdanna, the city rulers of Uruk and Aratta, both of whom claimed the sacred marriage with Inanna, confirms that women made better witches than men. Ensuḫkešdanna of Aratta informed his colleague in Uruk that he was superior and therefore the true bridegroom of Inanna. Both of these gentlemen boasted about their intimate adventures with the goddess and attacked each other with black magic. Ensuḫkešdanna from Aratta sent to Sumer a male magician who made the cows and goats in the livestock enclosures stop giving milk and their young starve. Then on a bank of the Euphrates, at the request of the herdsmen, the 'old woman' Sagburu appeared as a sorcerer. She and that magician measured each other up. They both threw fish-spawn into the river and the man fished out a carp. Then the woman pulled out an eagle, which seized the carp and made off with it to the mountains. Afterwards the man pulled a ewe with a lamb out of the water, but the woman sent a wolf which ran off with it to the wide plains. The test was repeatedly carried out, the man producing edible animals and the woman countering by conjuring up animals of prey. The man lost and the woman reproached him for his first spell against the livestock, stopping their supply of milk in the cult of Inanna. That was a grievous sin and he had to be put to death. The city ruler of Aratta now acknowledged the supremacy of the ruler of Uruk.[7]

According to popular belief the moon could be drawn down with witchcraft, for an Assyrian letter exclaims that 'their women will draw down the moon' to display their evil power.[8] Greeks and Romans believed that the Thessalian women were similarly evil, and depicted the fact on a Greek vase (Figure 31).[9]

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4 G. Leick, *Sex and eroticism in Mesopotamian literature* (1994) 229 f. See also Schwemer, 139, 249, 275.

5 J. Henderson in: R. Harris, *Gender and aging* (2000) 95–97.

6 R. Westbrook, *Festschrift R. Haaße* (2006) 50 f.

7 A. Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensuḫkešdanna. A Sumerian narrative poem* (1979); H. Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian kings. The matter of Aratta* (2004) 23–48.

8 SAA XVI 63 rev. 26 f.

9 M. Stol in: D. J. W. Meijer, *Natural phemonena* (1992) 259, 277 fig. 1; E. Reiner, *Astral magic in Babylonia* (1995) 97–101. A Babylonian witch is described as being able 'to let a star descend from heaven'; T. Abusch, D. Schwemer, *Corpus of Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft rituals* I (2011) 276:52, 285. Nunpiriggaldim, the legendary 'sage' of King Enmerkar of Aratta, brought down (the planet) Venus from heaven into the temple Eanna; this was his sin; E. Reiner, Or NS. 30 (1961) 4:10–13.

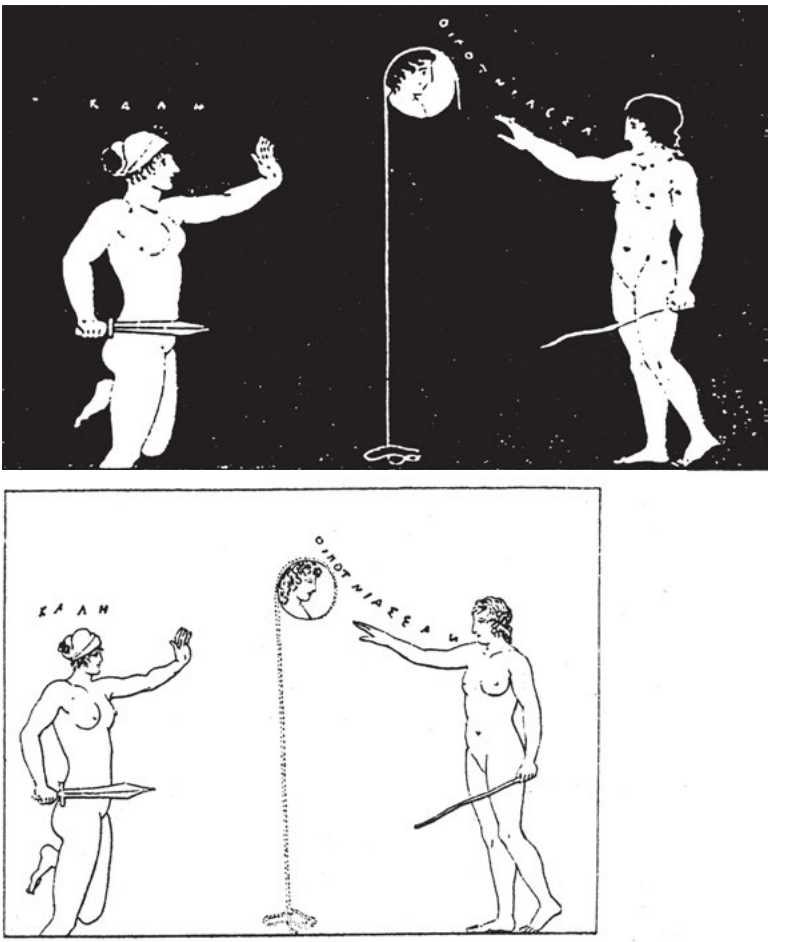

Fig. 31: A Greek vase (now lost) showing Thracian witches who were supposed to be able to draw down the moon, a technique referred to in an Assyrian letter.

Inexplicable illness was blamed on witchcraft, and causing someone to die through witchcraft was called 'slitting someone's throat'. Medical texts in which illnesses caused by witchcraft are described concern combinations of certain symptoms: headache, dizzy spells, joint pain, paralysis, deafness, stomach ache, depression, anxiety and perplexity, slobbering, phlegm, bleeding gums, impotence, alienation from one's surroundings.[10] Someone has said that women had

10 Schwemer, *Abwehrzauber* (2007) 167.

a hand chiefly in causing problems of digestion and potency, for it was a woman who always prepared the food for a man and also was seen to be lusting after him. So one should be on one's guard lest indigestion arise from bewitched food and impotency from sex with witches.[11]

While no-one knew a witch personally the consequences of witchcraft were visible everywhere and caused accusations to abound. The law-books examined what was false. One regulation about this is to be found in the Sumerian law-book of Ur-Nammu (§ 13). It is striking that there a sum of silver was a sufficient penalty for accusing someone falsely, but later the death penalty became standard.[12] In the much later laws from Assyria (Chapter 31) witchcraft was punishable by death and the law examined the matter in more detail about what to do if you heard of someone involved in witchcraft and if the eye-witness could say 'I saw it myself' (§ 47). In Babylonian times the judgement of the gods was determined through the process of the ordeal. The laws of Hammurabi begin with how to establish the truth of accusations of murder (§ 1) and of witchcraft.

> § 2. If a man charges another man with practising witchcraft but cannot bring proof against him, he who is charged with witchcraft shall go to the divine River, he shall jump into the divine River. If the divine River should overwhelm him, his accuser shall take full legal possession of his estate. If the divine River should clear that man and he should survive, he who made the charge of witchcraft against him shall be killed; he who submitted to the divine River shall take full legal possession of his accuser's estate.

If a case was difficult or could not be proved, one could either swear an oath or undergo the process of the ordeal to determine a judgement by the god. In Mesopotamia the ordeal meant that the accused would jump into the river and swim a good distance or walk in the hope of getting out again in one piece. This divine judgement was well-known in Mesopotamia, Syria (Carchemish) and Anatolia, and it was mostly associated with accusations which could not be proved. These would appear to be accusations such as those we come across in the letters from the royal archive at Mari, where divine judgement is sought for accusations of adultery, witchcraft, and the betrayal of state secrets. For a woman accused there of all of this the River determined whether the slander was true, according to a passage already translated and discussed in Chapter 10 about adultery.

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11 T. Abusch in: I. L. Finkel, *Disease in Babylonia* (2007) 150–153. He is also of the opinion that the woman adopts the methods of a healer, including the anointing and the like.

12 C. Wilcke, *Festschrift J. Krecher* (2014) 539 f.

There is a second example of an ordeal in Mari.[13] A woman declares first under oath that

> My daughter has not practised any witchcraft against H. That woman has not given H. bewitched wood, either in the gate or elsewhere, nor has she made him eat [witchcraft] either in bread, or food, or beer, or anything else.

We know of a witch who spat into food to bewitch it. An ordeal followed and the woman drowned.

> She fell into the middle of the divine River and she died; she was not absolved (by the River god).

It is striking that bewitched food and drink were served up so often, which makes us think of deliberate poisoning, which is indeed what it may have amounted to.[14]

Omens envisaged the possibility that a woman wanted to harm her husband or someone else by witchcraft. One liver omen predicted,

> If the left split looks as if it were the cuneiform sign ḪA, the woman will bewitch her husband.[15]

A medical magic text prescribes a preventative for the husband. He would have to wear a leather pouch containing certain items round his neck as a talisman against the threat,

> So that the machinations (witchcraft) of a woman do not strike her husband, so that the sin of the father and mother does not touch him: seed of the tamarisk, phlegm from the wild melon; (packed) in leather.[16]

In a letter from Mari we read of a princess who sent her lord herbs with magic properties.

> Regarding the herbs of black magic (*kišpū*), which Šimatum sent to my lord, the story is true, it is not a lie. Let my lord check the story.[17]

13 *AEM* 1/1 (1988) no. 253, the reverse side.
14 J.-M. Durand in: G. del Olmo Lete, *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* I (2008) 535 f., 'Les accusations de sorcellerie'; 617 f.
15 CT 20 43 i 4; U. S. Koch, *Secrets of extispicy* (2005) 108.
16 SpbTU II 112 no. 22 iv 7 f.
17 AEM 1/2 (1988) 76 no. 314:26–30.

What was this about? Scholars think that this woman wanted to kill her rival at court, her sister Princess Kirûm.[18] Later the writer of the letter said that by slandering 'my lord' she had been severely punished by the god, so that she gnawed her fingers and became subject to epileptic fits.

> The god of my lord 'reached' her and made her gnaw her fingers and she has regular fits of epilepsy.[19]

Possibly these and other accusations, made by a husband or other close family members, were attempts to eliminate an unpleasant person.[20] In the Hittite sources women at court might be suspected of having had a hand in the sickness or death of an eminent personage.[21] The best-known case is that of King Muršili II (ca. 1300 BC), who said of his stepmother, the last wife of his predecessor, a Babylonian princess, that she was supposed to have killed his dear wife by witchcraft. Oracles permitted him either to kill her or to depose her from any priestly office. The king chose the latter.[22] It is striking that to combat black magic among the Hittites it was not a man but 'the Old Woman' who was appointed for the task. There are indications that she was sometimes suspected of using her knowledge of the black arts against other people.[23]

The witch had a great deal of power. Gods could prompt the witch to perform black magic.[24] One ritual was intended to 'reconcile a seriously ill person with his (personal) god and goddess' and directly afterwards mentions that it would 'jerk the witchcraft out of his body'. So such sorcery was the result of the wrath of the gods.[25] The witch could alienate a person from his god, with the result that he turns against him. The man's fate could even be altered for the worse in this way, with all the attendant consequences.[26] The handbook against black magic is called *Maqlû*, 'burning'. In it the witch is portrayed as someone who accuses

18 Schwemer, 122. J.-M. Durand surmises that in this way she wishes to invalidate the oath embodied in a treaty; NABU 2004/41; in *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* I, 536, 618.
19 AEM 1/2 71 no. 312:36–39.
20 S. Lafont, *Femmes*, 242.
21 Schwemer, 259–263. The king's sister Ziplantawiya performing sorcery against the royal family: translation by B. J. Collins in M. W. Chavalas, *Women*, 255–260.
22 S. Lafont, *Femmes* (1999) 242. The source: S. R. Bir-Nun, *The Tawananna in the Hittite kingdom* (1975) 186 f.; H. A. Hoffner, JAOS 103 (1983) 187–193; Y. Cohen, *Taboos and prohibitions in Hittite society* (2002) 150–155 (in col. iii). See Schwemer, 261.
23 Schwemer, 260, 275. Translations of texts: B. J. Collins in Chavalas, *Women*, 246–255.
24 D. Schwemer, 149.
25 Schwemer, TUAT NF 5 (2010) 131:9 f. (= KAL 2 no. 24).
26 Schwemer, 150, 154.

her victim in court. In the ritual she is eventually sentenced and burned herself. She was thoroughly destroyed,[27] and the patient and his house were purified. This ritual is written on eight clay tablets containing about a hundred spells. A ninth tablet describes the ritual. It was carried out at the end of the fifth month, when the spirits of the dead came up in the night and in the early morning.[28] In this later period (after 1000 BC) superhuman characteristics were attributed to the witch and she was seen as a danger to general well-being. This handbook functioned also as outlining a ritual to protect the state from her power and to cleanse away any taints in society. The witch with her fierce false tongue now had the characteristics of a diabolical figure. T. Abusch has shown how she was able to unleash the wrath of the gods on her victim.[29] This image of the witch fits with the Biblical image of the devil, who was also presented as an accuser ('Satan') and who became increasingly powerful.[30]

The Neo-Babylonian law-book contains an entry which has been badly transmitted and is impossible to understand properly.

> § 7. As for a woman who 'purifies' witchcraft or makes 'purification' on the field of a man or on the street or in a ship or in an oven or wherever else, of the trees which she has 'purified' she shall give threefold the yield to the owner of the field. If she has 'purified' in a ship or in an oven or somewhere else, she shall give threefold the shortfall that has occurred on the field.

One suggested explanation is that the law 'seems to be directed against the woman who wants to pour out defiled (bewitched) water over someone's field or in front of his door'.[31]

Finally we note that the prophet Isaiah condemned the daughter of Babylon for spells and sorcery during the Exile, saying she could expect

> loss of children and widowhood, despite your many sorceries, all your countless spells (Isaiah 47:9).

He then goes even further by daring her to

27 M. Stol in: C. Houtman, *De leugen regeert … Valse beschuldiging in de Bijbel en de wereld van de Bijbel* (2004) 130–132.

28 T. Abusch in: G. Leick, *The Babylonian world* (2007) 379–385. For a full translation of Maqlû see TUAT NF 4 (2008) 128–186.

29 T. Abusch, *Mesopotamian Witchcraft. Toward a history and understanding of Babylonian witchcraft beliefs and literature* (2002) 14, 27 ff. Summarised by Leick, 374 f.

30 Stol in Houtman, 134 f. Now T. Abusch, *The magical ceremony Maqlû* (2015).

31 K. van der Toorn, *From her cradle to her grave* (1994) 114.

> persist in your spells (*ḥèbèr*) and your many sorceries (*kèšèf*), in which you have trafficked all your life (Isaiah 47:12).

Earlier the prophet Nahum had lamented over Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, claiming that the massacre she had suffered was a result of her harlotry and sorcery,

> all for the persistent harlotry of a harlot, the alluring mistress of sorcery (*kèšèf*), who by her harlotry and sorceries beguiled nations and peoples (Nahum 3:4).

These two cities were always a byword for whoring in antiquity and this charge was persistently held against them.