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# Writing Divine Names in Ritual Practices of Ancient Mesopotamia

**Abstract:** In this chapter, I will investigate the relationships between the names of divine agents and their writing down as part of the ritual procedure. The corpus consists mainly in prescriptive incantatory texts (first half of the 1st millennium BC), as well as curses in *kudurru* and royal inscriptions (end of the 2nd – first half of the 1st millennium BC). In order to fight against the terrifying demoness Lamaštu – the one who attacks infants and pregnant women – the Mesopotamian expert had a series of incantations at his disposal containing a detailed description of words to be pronounced and gestures to be made. He was invited to fashion several dog figurines from various materials and place them in different locations around the house. On their bodies, the expert inscribed their specific name, assigning a specific identity to each of the dogs. The ritual act of writing makes these ritual artefacts active and effective; it is deeply related to the materiality of the object, representing, and making the benevolent entities present in the ritual scene. A divine name is also understood for its vocal feature and must be pronounced. The cuneiform signs help to make this pronunciation eternal.

"When Heavens above were not named . . ." is the incipit – the very first words – of the well-known Babylonian epic of creation, the *Enūma eliš*.[1] The narrative opens with a description of a world with no life. Even for the gods, their personal name is the condition of their own existence. This is particularly important in ritual contexts where an interaction with one or more supra-human entities may occur. In cuneiform sources, the procedures undertaken show us the complexity of this kind of dialogue. As the material and physical receptacle of the offerings, the cult statue is central to this communication between human and divine beings: it makes present and represents the divine power.[2] But sometimes, the cult statue is not sufficient or is absent. Effective words and precise gestures are required, depending on the purpose of each procedure. The officiant manipulates materials with various sensitive properties and convokes (from the Latin *convocare* "to call, summon, invite") one god, one goddess, a divine couple or even a more numerous group of deities by their own name. This name – specific to each deity – can also be multiple; the officiant must then enumerate all of them in litanies that can sometimes be lengthy. The scrupulous respect of

1 For an edition, commentary, bibliography, and mythological and narrative content, see Lambert 2013, 3–280; and Wisnom 2019.

2 For this topic of *presenting* and *presencing* the divine in anthropology and ancient Mesopotamian contexts, see Gumbrecht 2004 and the introduction in Pongratz-Leisten/Sonik 2015.


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the sequence is the guarantee of not omitting any aspect of the divine power from which the expert wishes to receive help. To complete the link materially, writing the divine name is an essential strategic step in the ritual.

This chapter will focus on the relations between the names of divine agents and their writing down by human agents as part of the ritual procedure. The corpus of analysed sources will consist mainly of curses in royal inscriptions, as well as prescriptive incantatory texts that are preserved on cuneiform tablets written in Akkadian (and Sumerian) at the end of the 2nd-beginning of the 1st millennium BCE. I will examine the ritual contexts in which some experts need to inscribe the divine name and how they do it. Also, which divine entity is implemented in this ritual practice? On what material support? Is there a performative connection with the incantation itself, that is, the effective word pronounced by the officiant, the so-called speech act?

## 1 Acting on Divine Entities: Knowledge, Names and the Power of Writing

Among the numerous ritual procedures described in cuneiform sources of the 1st millennium BCE, those carried out to fight the demoness Lamaštu seem to use the process of writing down the divine name as a ritual act more frequently. Daughter of the great god An, her written name[3] is introduced by the dingir-sign, which is a classifier for all the divine entities. This demoness was particularly feared in ancient Mesopotamia. The privileged victims of her attacks were infants and pregnant women; it was therefore of utmost importance to be able to fight her and protect oneself against her attacks through various rituals. Epigraphic attestations and archaeological findings such as amulets illustrate how widespread such practices were throughout the Ancient Near East.

The ritual procedures are described in prescriptive texts held by the specialists of rituals, the officiants who complete them in favour of a specific victim. Following the same pattern as other ritual descriptions, they combine incantations to be read out loud by the officiant or the patient themselves – depending on the situations – and a set of ritual gestures accompanying and amplifying the recitation. Assyriological studies have designated this combination of words, gestures and actions to be performed by the general term "incantation". These "incantations" are all written in the second person singular and are addressed to the officiant who will perform the procedure. The incantations are now well-known by our modern scientific community. They have a long history which goes back to the 3rd millennium BCE.[4] Walter Farber[5] re-

**3** As A. George showed it, the Sumerian name of the demoness should be read as KAMAD.ME (George 2018).

**4** Farber 2014, 7–15.

**5** Farber 2014.

cently published a critical edition of the canonical series – that is, tablets explicitly devoted to fighting Lamaštu and bearing the title $^{d}$DIM$_3$.ME.KE$_4$ "Lamaštu". The incantations against Lamaštu may also be found on amulets with iconographical representations of the demoness. Lamaštu has a monstrous and hybrid appearance: she is depicted with the wide-open mouth of a lion as if she were roaring; she has the legs and feet of an eagle. She is seen breastfeeding a puppy and a piglet. She rides on a donkey on a boat sailing along the Hubur river which leads to the Netherworld.[6] These amulets were probably hung around the neck of the patient.[7] The literary descriptions of Lamaštu fit her iconographical representations.

Farber was able to reconstruct up to three sets of several incantations which share common principles of ritual actions. The procedures frequently revolve around providing the demoness with everything she would need for her trip back home: sandals, food, etc. Objects, such as seals or figurines, are formed by the officiant during the ritual and used in various ways. Depending on the procedure, they may be a representation of the demoness herself but also of other entities assisting the priest in the ritual fight. These objects are inscribed with the name of the supra-human entity they represent, as described in the two following ritual procedures.[8] By naming them, the officiant makes them present in the ritual scene.

> RITUAL 1
> Spell: "Dimme, Child of An' is her (Lamaštu) first name, / the second is 'Sister of the Gods of the streets' / the third is 'Sword that Splits the Head' / the fourth is 'She who Lights the Fire' / the fifth is 'Goddess whose Face is Wild' / the sixth is 'Entrusted one, Adopted Daughter of Irnina' / the seventh is 'By the Spell of the Great Gods May you be bound' / 'You should fly away with the birds of the sky, or else . . .!' MAGIC FORMULA / RECITATION (to use against) Lamaštu / ITS RITUAL: you write (the spell) on a cylinder seal made from clay (and) place it around the neck of the baby (*Lamaštu series* I, Farber 2014, 144, l. 1–10).[9]

In this first ritual, the names are those of the demoness Lamaštu. They are written down on a clay cylinder seal that is to be placed around the neck of the patient. The

**6** One of the most famous examples is the "Plaque de conjuration" held at the Louvre Museum in Paris (AO 22205) from the Neo-Assyrian period (9$^{th}$–6$^{th}$ century BCE), see pictures of the object https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010120479 (last consultation, october 2023). See other representations in Farber 2014, 2–6.

**7** Wiggermann 2000; Heessel 2002; 2011; Farber 2014, 29–33.

**8** Other apotropaic or exorcistic rituals include the same procedures. It is not my aim here to present all of them, as they share the same features as the two rituals that I analyse here. See, for instance, the ritual *šēp lemutti ina bīt amēli parāsu* "to block the entry of the enemy in someone's house" (Wiggermann 1992, 6–9, l. 20–50; 10–11, l. 115–123; 14–15, l. 195–205).

**9** EN$_2$ $^{d}$Dim$_3$-me dumu AN-*a šumša ištēn* / *šanû aḫat ilī ša sūqāti* / *šalšu patru ša qaqqada ilattû* / *rebû ša išāta inappaḫu* / *ḫanšu iltu ša panūša šakṣū* / *šeššu paqid qāti leqât Irnina* / *sebû nīs ilī rabûti lū tamâti* / *itti iṣṣūr šamê lū tapparrašī-ma* TU$_6$ EN$_2$ / KA.INIM.MA $^{d}$DIM$_3$.ME.KE$_4$ / DU$_3$.DU$_3$.BI *ina muḫḫi kunuk ṭīdi tašaṭṭar šerru ina kišādišu tašakkan*. The same procedure is described in Lamastu series III, Farber 2014, 186–187, l. 8–28.

names function as a *magic formula* that summons the demoness, so that the officiant can act on her. Each of these names describes one characteristic of the demoness, and the set of all seven names provide a complete portrait of her: we have her divine genealogy (daughter of the great god An, sister of the street gods, adopted daughter of Irnina), her favourite place of attack (the street), the destructive power of her attacks (compared to a sword or a fire), and her monstrous appearance (a savage face); the last name grants the key that destroys her thanks to the magical power of the incantation. Divine names are social constructions, and respond to historical, geographical, social, political and religious purposes. This polyonymy – multiple names for one being – is specific to supra-human entities and plays a part in distinguishing them from human beings. Using all of her seven names, the officiant summons and designates Lamaštu, who identifies and recognises herself.

In the following ritual, the names of supra-human entities are written down by the officiant on a ritual object – here, a figurine. The procedure seeks not only to convoke these entities in the ritual scene, but also to ask for their divine help and intervention:

> RITUAL 2.1
> Its Ritual: Dust from the palace gate, dust from the gate of the Ištar temple / dust from the gate of the Ninurta temple, dust from the door of an *aštammu*-bar / dust from the door of a brew-pub, dust from the door of a bakery / dust from a street crossing you crush together using a mortar, mix it with clay from a canal, and form a tablet and dogs. / On the tablet, you draw a sun disc, a moon crescent, a crook and a star. / You write the incantation 'Fierce is the Daughter of Anu' on it. / You hang it up at the head of the bed. The dogs / you paint in different colours, using gypsum and charcoal. / Hair from a black dog (you attach) to their upper foreheads, / hair from a virgin kid you attach to their tails. / You write their names on the left side of their backs. / Windows to the right and left of the outer door, / of the inner door and of the door to the bedroom you open. / Lower down, you open a hole facing the door. (The dogs) 'Fast-is-his-attack' / (and) 'Watch-(all)-night, fend-off-the Daughter-of-Anu!'/ you let sit in the windows of the outer door. / 'Very-swift-is-his-attack' and 'Don't-be-negligent-in-your-watchfulness'/ you let sit in the windows of the inner door. 'Without-hesitation-use-your-muzzle! (lit. 'without-hesitation-open-your-mouth') (and) 'Overthrow-the-wicked-one'. . . / you let sit in the windows of the bedroom door/ 'Sîn-is-the-herdsman-of-the-dogs' you let sit in the hole / facing the door (*Lamaštu Series* II, rit. 7, Farber 2014, 168–171, l. 61–83).[10]

Although these ritual gestures are carried out for the same purpose – that is, to chase Lamaštu away – the writing of divine names is not exclusive to these demonic entities

**10** [$DU_3$.$DU_3$.BI *eper bāb] e[ka]lli e[p]er bāb bīt Ištar / eper bāb bīt Ninurta [eper bāb aštammi] / [eper b]āb bīt sābî eper bāb bīt nuḫ[atimmi] / [eper sūq erbetti ina*ʔ *urṣi*ʔ *ištēniš tasâk] / itti ṭīd palgi tuballal-ma ṭuppa u kalbī tep[puš] / [ina muḫḫi ṭuppi šamšata uska]ra gamla kakkabta teṣṣir /* $EN_2$ *[ezzet mā]rat Anu ina muḫḫi tašaṭṭar / ina r[ēš erši t]allal kalbī / ina gaṣṣi upillê tubarr[am] / šārat kalb[i ṣalmi] ina abbuttišunu / šārat unīqi [lā] petīti ina zibbātīšunu tašakkan / šumīšunu ina naglab šumēlišunu tašaṭṭar / apāt imni u šumēli šā bābi kamî / ša bābi bītānî [u*ʔ *ša bāb bīt erši tepette] / ina šaplim-ma*ʔ *pīta ša ana tarṣi bā[bi tep]et[te Šaruḫ-tibušu] / Uṣur-mūša-ṭu[rud-Mārat-Anu] / ina libbi apāti [ša bā]bi k[amî tušeš-šeb] / Urruḫ-[tibušu] Ana-maṣṣar[tika-lā-teggi] / ina libbi apā[ti ša b]ābi bītān[î tušeššeb] / ē-tamtal(l)ik-e[puš]-pīka Sikip-lemna(-)[. . . . . .] / ina libbi ap[āti ša] bāb bīt erši [tušešseb] / Sî[n]-r[ē'i-ka]lbī ina li[bbi pīt]i*ʔ */ [ša ana tarṣ]i bābi tu[šeš]šeb.*

that can be either beneficent or malevolent (or even both) towards humans.[11] In ritual 2.1, each dog figurine bears only one specific name. In ritual 1, the incantation contains all the seven names (MU/*šūmu*) of Lamaštu. We are dealing here with a common feature of the sumero-akkadian incantations: the officiant mentions all of the entities – or all the names of the entity – they are fighting against, making sure not to miss out any of them. That way, their action will be effective.

As already noticed by Farber,[12] Lamaštu's names may vary slightly from one procedure to another, or from one version of the same ritual to another. Although some words are not strictly identical, their semantic and symbolic content are more or less synonymous; they are set by the scholarly tradition. Farber presents a variant of Ritual 2.1, where the figurines of dogs bear the same name and are placed in the same location.[13]

> RITUAL 2.2
> Its ritual: you write (the incantation on) a tablet. A moon crescent, a sun disc, a star and a crook / you draw on (it), hang it up at the head of the bed. / (The dogs named) 'Fast-is-his-attack', 'Watch-(all)-night-fend-off-the Daughter-of-Anu' / are the two dogs of the outer door. / 'Very-swift-is-his-attack' and 'Don't-be-negligent-in-your-watchfullness' / are the two dogs of the inner door. / 'Bite-without-hesitation' "(lit. 'without-hesitation-open-your-mouth')" (and) 'Overthrow-the-wicked-one' . . . / are the two dogs of the bedroom door. / (Sîn-is-the herdsman-of-the-dogs' is the dog of the window. / Dust from the palace gate, dust from the gate of the Ištar temple, / dust from the door of an *aštammu*-bar, dust from the gate of the Ninurta temple, / dust from a brew-pub, dust from the door of a bakery, / (and) dust from a street crossing you crush together using a mortar, / mix it with clay from a canal, and form seven dogs. / You paint (them) in different colors, using gypsum and charcoal. / You attach hair from a black dog to their upper foreheads, / (and) hair from a virgin kid you attach to their tails. / Their names you write on the left sides of their backs. (Farber 2014, 170–171, l. 61*–78*).

The dogs' names are based on a descriptive grammatical form (such as "very-swift-is-his-attack"), as well as on the use of the imperative to give an order ("don't be negligent", "overthrow the wicked one"). Names can be a description of the expected attack of the dog, as well as its main abilities (like its watchfulness). The location is always a passageway constituting a liminal place between outside and inside, between the public and the private spaces.

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**11** Sonik 2013, 113–115. For the taxonomy of Zwischenwesen in ancient Mesopotamia, see the study of Karen Sonik (Sonik 2013).

**12** Farber 2014, 145.

**13** $DU_3$.$DU_3$.BI *ṭuppa tašaṭṭar uskara šamša[ta kakkabt]a gamla / ina muḫḫi teṣṣir ina rēš e[rši t]alla[l] / Šaruḫ-tibušu Uṣur-mūša-ṭurud-[Mārat-Anu]/ šina kalbū ša bābi [kamî] / Urruḫ-tibušu ana-maṣṣ[artika-lā-te]ggi / šina kalbū [ša bābi bītāni] / ē-tamtalik-epuš-p[īka Sikip-lemna . . .] / šina kalbū [ša bāb bīt erši] / Sîn-rē'i-kalbī kalbu ša apti / eper bāb ekalli eper b[āb bīt I]štar / ep[er b]āb aštammi eper [bāb bīt Ninu]rta / eper bāb bīt sābî [eper bāb bīt] nuḫatimmi / eper sūq erbetti ina[ʔ] ur[ṣi[ʔ] ištēni]š tasâk / itti ṭīd palgi tuballal [7 kalbī teppuš] / ina gaṣṣi upillê [tubarram] / šārat kalbi ṣalmi [ina abbutt]i[šun]u[ʔ] / šārat unīqi [lā petīti ina zibbātišun]u [tašakkan] / šumšunu ina n[aglab šumēlišunu] taša[ṭṭar].*

Regarding our inquiry about writing divine names in ritual contexts, the ritual procedures (Ritual 1 with the names of Lamaštu, and Rituals 2.1 and 2.2 with the dog figurines) share common features. Writing (an action expressed, through the verb *šaṭāru*, written syllabically or with the logogram SAR) is part of the procedure and is fully considered to be part of the ritual, whether at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the process. The officiant does not manipulate objects or figurines that already bear cuneiform inscriptions; they write cuneiform signs during their cultic performance and compose the divine name according to a certain tradition, with some flexibility.

What is written is qualified as the "name" (logogram MU, Akkadian *šūmu*) of the entity that is mentioned in the incantation, or represented by the figurine. Ritual 1 (Lamaštu) is slightly different as the names (*šūmu*/MU) are integrated in the main incantation, which is then written down on a cylinder seal (*kunukku*). This object has a long history in Mesopotamia since it appears in the Uruk period (end of the 4$^{th}$ millennium BCE). At the beginning, it only bears figurative scenes; names and social/political/religious functions of the owner are added from the middle of the 3$^{rd}$ millennium BCE. This object is an extension of the identity of the individual whose name is written on it.[14] Printed in clay thanks to the seal, the name then engages the individual in legal affairs beyond time. It gives presence and represents the individual. According to the procedure in ritual 1, the ritual cylinder seal is made of clay for the ritual, and should be different from the one used in daily life. Placed around the patient's neck, the inscribed cylinder-seal misleads the demoness. It deceitfully gives Lamaštu the impression that the baby already belongs her, so that she will not attack him/her again. The ritual procedure suggests that the demoness can read the cuneiform signs, whether the names are syllabically or logographically written, and target specific victims without amulets.[15]

In rituals 1 and 2.1/2.2, names provide a certain specificity and individuality: the supra-human entities do not act as a group; they are identified by their own names.

The ritual procedure establishes a close relation between the written inscription and its support, be it the tablet bearing the incantation or the dog figurines. In rituals 2.1 and 2.2, the precise location of the inscription – the left side of the dogs' back – is indicated, whereas ritual 1 indicates the material out of which the cylinder seal engraved with the incantation should be made.

It is worth noting that these ritual designations do not correspond to contemporary theophoric anthroponyms, which are built on a divine name with a verbal form, creating a brief sentence. For instance, one of the most famous exorcists of the Neo-Assyrian period is Nabû-zuqup-kēnu, whose name can be translated as: "O Nabû, keep upright

**14** For the symbolic use of the cylinder seal associated with the personality of the individual, see Finet 1969.

**15** For instance, her first name is written in Sumerian: $^{d}dim_{10}$ dumu an-na "Dimme, daughter of An," whereas her second name is in Akkadian, combining both syllabic signs and logograms: *a-ḫat* DINGIR.MEŠ *ša$_2$ su-qa-a-ti* "sister of the gods of the streets" (Farber 2014, 68).

the true one!".[16] Human names sound like wishes or *omina* addressed to the deities. In the rituals examined previously, written names belong to entities of the supra-human world. They fulfil either a wish or an order function, like one of the dogs' names in ritual 2, who is called "Watch-(all)-night, fend-off-the Daughter-of-Anu!"); they also refer to a descriptive quality of the entity (again, in ritual 2, a dog is named "Very-swift-is-his-attack"). These kinds of "transparent names" are similar to epithets describing specific qualities or powers of an invisible entity.

Regarding the dogs' figurines, their names match their location and functions, as they are placed at a window, at the border between private and public places, or open and close spaces So, they are ready to attack a potential enemy. They must guard the entire ritual place. They are no longer figurines; they act like real *demonic*/*divine* dogs, able to protect people and attack the demoness.

As we can see in ritual 2 (1 and 2), writing a divine name in cuneiform signs is not the only ritual act in the procedure. The figurines are moulded into the shape of dogs (which they are supposed to represent) to which the officiant must then add dog's hair. The *medium* which represents and gives a material, perceptible presence to the invisible entity[17] is a multi-sensory object, involving sight and touch (as well as thermoception depending on the sensations aroused by touching the object). Furthermore, benevolent dogs are not the only divine entities to be summoned. Before shaping dogs out of clay, the officiant draws (*eṣēru*) a sun disc, a moon crescent, a crook and a star on a tablet. The ritual procedure uses two different verbs for drawing (*eṣēru*) and writing (*šaṭāru*), distinguishing between these different actions. The elements that are drawn are symbols of the great gods, that is, iconographical representations or attributes that can be found on stela or on *kudurru*:[18] the sun disc stands for the sun-god Šamaš, the moon crescent for the moon-god Sīn, and the star for the goddess Ištar. As the drawings are made at the very beginning of the ritual procedure, the officiant places the entire procedure under the patronage of powerful great gods who are at the top of the divine pantheon. Here, symbols may be equivalent to their names and writing is not more powerful than drawing. All means of communication are valid when it comes to addressing and identifying the supra-human powers. It becomes clear that the efficacy of the procedure relies on the combination of the two *media*. In an insightful study on cuneiform writing, Piotr Michalowski underlines this solidarity in the context of the royal statuary, a quote that perfectly fits our inquiry:

**16** Baker/Pearce 2000.

**17** Belting 2004; Pongratz-Leisten/Sonik 2015.

**18** See for instance the top of the *kudurru* of the kassite Babylonian king Melišipak held at the Louvre museum (SB 22, photo available on the website of the museum: https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010174452, last consultation October 2023).

> Stone stelae represent royal authority, and it is the combined effect of writing, symbolic imagery, and the very medium itself that work together to express certain concepts (. . .) It was thus a combination of medium, image, and writing that worked together, not a series of discrete unit.[19]

Be it in ritual 1 or in rituals 2.1 and 2.2, writing grants the names a long-lasting efficacy. The names are pronounced during the very moment of the ritual procedure, as demonstrated in ritual 1 by the fact that the names constitute the content of the oral incantation. Writing those names down makes their utterance last forever. Whoever reads it – aloud or to themselves – will reactivate the power of the words contained in the divine onomastic sequence again and again. Long after the ritual has been completed, whoever discovers the dog figurines cannot take them for simple "dogs": their names indicate their supra-human nature, their power as well as their protective and apotropaic functions all together. This long-lasting function of the written name is also made possible by the material from which the figurine is made. They are neither made of ephemeral material, nor voluntarily destroyed during the ritual.

Writing out the name of an entity during a ritual procedure may also be found in anti-witchcraft procedures dating to the 1st millennium BCE.[20] As in the previous examples, writing names down participates in the *representation* and the *presencing* of an invisible force; in the specific context of anti-witchcraft procedures, a human sorcerer or sorceress who has attacked an individual. The ritual gestures include the shaping of a concrete medium which is later inscribed with the name of the absentee, that is, the malevolent human assailant. The ritual material becomes a visual and tangible support used to make the enemy present in the ritual scene. The enemy and the object are one; by destroying the latter, the officiant attacks the former and cancels the effects of their malevolence.[21]

The presence of the written names suggests the implicit presence of an audience,[22] be it a human or a supra-human one. During ritual procedures, the officiant convokes the malevolent or benevolent entity by writing its name on a support. The name gives the enemy/adversary entity a presence, and participates in establishing a bridge between the human and the divine spheres. What the officiant says may be heard or what he writes may be read by whoever is present in the ritual setting, such as the patient/victim for instance. We should not underestimate the psychological impacts this could have for the audience listening or deciphering the magical names.[23] Furthermore, the complexity

**19** Michalowski 1990, 64.

**20** Abusch/Schwemer 2011; 2016.

**21** For instance: [$DU_3$.$DU_3$.BI *ṣa*]*lam bēl dabābīka ša ṭīdi teppuš šumšu ina nagla*[*b šumēlīšu tašaṭṭar* . . .] / [*šipta ann*]*īta šalāšīšu tamannu ina asīd šēp šumēlīka tasê*[*ršu* . . .] "Its ritual: you make a figurine of clay representing your adversary. You write his name on his left shoulder . . . You recite this incantation three times. You crush it with the heel of your left foot" ritual 8.23, l. 5′–6′ (Abusch/Schwemer 2016).

**22** Michalowski 1990, 65.

**23** Abusch/Schwemer 2011, 20–24.

of the cuneiform writing made access to its reading limited. Not everyone was able to decipher the signs. Only the intellectual elite, after extensive training,[24] had the necessary skills to understand what was written. During the ritual, the officiant was the only holder of this knowledge, both practical – writing the right cuneiform signs in the clay – and theoretical – the proper names of the superhuman entities. Ritual writing became a means of distinguishing the officiant, who was then able to create the bridge with the divine world.

One inscription of the Babylonian king Nabuchodonosor II (605–562 BCE) gives a description of a sacred place where a written artefact is placed to be seen: "The name of Ninkarrak[25] who dwells in Eulla, was written (*šaṭir*) on the back of a dog. It could be seen (*innamir*, from the verb *amāru* in N-stem) in the middle of it."[26] The use of a dog figurine is not surprising as the dog is the animal associated with the goddess of medicine.[27] These written objects were then supposed to be at least seen, and maybe even read, by a human audience. The goddess Ninkarrak has her name written on the dog, and the inscription uses the Akkadian expression *zikir šūmi* "the pronunciation of the name," with the substantive *zikru*, from the root *zakāru* "to talk, to speak, to name." A vocal feature of the written name should be highlighted as it can be found in other ritual contexts; even when written down, a divine name has a sonorous characteristic. This is what we will explore now.

## 2 A Ritual Sound Writing

Our contemporary western society is particularly marked by silent reading or reading in a low voice. This practice is even taught in elementary classes at school to children learning to read. However, silent reading was, and still is, not a universal practice. In his investigation of the murmur in Mesopotamia, Grayson introduces the topic by mentioning a passage from *Confessions* of Augustine: Augustine witnesses with surprise the silent reading of Ambrose of Milan.[28] The Mesopotamian lexical lists underline the link between the name, its written form, and its pronunciation. In the list, entitled *Malku-šarru,* from the 1st millennium BCE, which gathers together Akkadian

**24** Tinney 1998, 1999; Veldhuis 1997, 2006; Jean 2006.

**25** Literally "name/command/utterance of the name of Ninkarrak" (*zikir šūm ša Ninkarrak*). In the first millennium, Ninkarrak, the name of the goddess of medicine (also known as Gula, or Ninisinna). For the history of this goddess, see Heffron 2016.

**26** *zi-ki-ir šu$_{2/4}$-um ša $^{d}$Ninkarrak a-ši-ba-at e$_{3}$-ul-la ṣēri kalbi šaṭirma i-na qe$_{2}$-er-bi-šu in-na-mi-ir* (*VAB* 4 144 ii l. 18–19).

**27** Charpin 2017, 31–60.

**28** Grayson 2000, 301; Rendu Loisel 2016, 204–206. See also the study on reading in Medieval times: Bouchet 2008.

synonyms, the *narû*-stele, which is used as a boundary stone or may have contained inscribed laws and regulations,[29] has the following equivalents:

> [*na-ru-u*$_2$] = ˹*na*¹-*ru*-˹*u*¹, [*a*]-˹*su*¹-*mit*-˹*tum*¹, [*š*]*i-ṭir šu-mi, [š]u-mu zak-ru*
> "stele" = stele, inscribed slab, writing of the name, pronounced (*zakru*) name" (*Malku* V, l. 196–199).

The link between the name, its written form and its pronunciation is best illustrated with the *kudurru* from the Kassite period (second half of the 2nd millennium BCE in Babylonia). These stelae most often record a royal donation of land for a high official, or a member of the royal family. Each stele is inscribed with a cuneiform text containing the precise description of the donation, the list of witnesses, as well as a series of divine curses launched against those who may violate the inscription or act against its content. The *kudurru* also presents an iconographic component, with the symbolic representation of the deities who protect the *kudurru* and the donation it commemorates. These stelae were exhibited in temples, but a copy in the form of a cuneiform tablet was also produced and kept by the new owner and recipient of the donation or the royal administration.[30] The curses section of these texts is directly relevant to our topic. In the following example, taken from a *kudurru* of the Kassite king Nazi-maruttaš (1307–1282 BCE), at the end of the curses we can read a sentence that occurs on other *kudurru*:

> Let the great gods whose names are mentioned (*šumšunu zakāru*) on this stone, whose weapons are manifested (*kakkušunu kullumu*), whose pedestals/residences are indicated (*šubātušunu uddâ*), may they curse him with an evil curse! May they destroy (*ḫalāqu*) his name (MU-*šu*)! His seed should not be neglected (*nīda aḫi rašû*) during removal (*šūlû*) (Louvre SB 21, iii l. 16–29; Paulus 2004: 328).[31]

By "weapons" (*kakku*) and "pedestals" (*šubātu*), the sentence refers to the Kassite iconographic representations of the gods; *kudurru* depicts divinities with non-anthropomorphic symbols (animals, objects, weapons), which are frequently drawn above a representation of an altar. In the preceding quote, "weapon" (*kakku*) designates the symbols, whereas "the pedestals" (*šubātu*) may designate the altars. Names, weapons and pedestals are all related to the divine entity they represent: they make its divine power present and effective.

Contrary to the ritual procedures against Lamaštu, the very act of writing the divine names down is not part of the curse. It may have belonged to another ritual procedure dealing with the installation of the *kudurru*. With their names and iconographical symbols, gods are present and can already carry out threats. Writing out the name that

**29** See the attestations in CAD N, vol. 1, "*narû* A", 364–367.

**30** Suzanne Paulus recently proposed a brand new edition of these stelae (Paulus 2014).

**31** See also *MDP* 2 pl. 23 vii 27; see also *BBSt* n°5 iii 20; *BBSt* n°4 iv 5; *VAS* 1 37 v 46.

has been spoken fixes and prolongs the effects of the curse. Writing makes possible the repetition of the ritual utterances.

With musical instruments, weapons seem to play a particular role in the ritual system. Assyrian and Babylonian royal inscriptions from the 1st millennium BCE show that weapons symbolised the god when the king was in campaign. In the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, the king commemorates the fact that he established the weapon of the great god of the empire, Aššur, at the end of the construction of a palace or city in a newly conquered place. This weapon represents and gives a tangible form to the god's presence in his new territory.[32]

The gods are present thanks to three different media (names, weapons, sieges), which are drawn on the *kudurru* itself. The writing of the name, the symbolic drawing of the god, his weapon or throne are effective in representing and embodying the divine agency in the human world. These media respond to and complement each other so that the supra-human power can act efficiently, in accordance with the curses that involve them. If we look more closely at the way the Akkadian language deals with the divine name, we find the root *zakāru* "to say, to name, to speak," used to specify the modalities of utterance of the name (*šūmu*). Names are "spoken" (*zakrū*): the vocal dimension is an integral part of the writing of the name, and therefore of the divine entity itself. Speech is the fourth *medium* necessary for the representation and *presencing* of the god (the three other medias being the written name, the weapon and the siege). This vocal and sound dimension invites us to wonder about the voices that are able, authorised or empowered to pronounce divine names. These agents can be multiple: it could be the craftsman who engraves the stele, the officiant in charge of installing the stele in the temple, who is directly involved in the transaction with the gods, but it can also be a wider audience, those who read the inscription in a near or remote future and are not necessarily related to the primary ritual procedure. In this latter case, the inscribed divine names are then reactivated together with the curses put under their control. An inscription on a rock relief in Bavian (Iraq) by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (795–681 BCE) stresses the vocal dimension of the curse:

> I made six stelai ($NA_4$.NA.$RU_2$) (and) fashioned the images of the great gods, my lords, on them. and I placed before them a statue (*ṣalmu*) of my royalty in humility position (*lābin appi*) (. . .) (At any time, whoever destroys my work) may the great gods, all those names mentioned (*šūmu nabû*) in this stela, curse him with curse of evil (*arrat marušti lirrurušuma*); may they overthrow his dynasty (BALA-*šu*$_2$ *sakāpu*) (Sennacherib 223 = *OIP* 2 84–85, l. 55 and l. 59).[33]

The names of the great gods are written logographically or syllabically, according to the theonym lists.[34] Completed by the presence of symbols on the stele, the writing of the names leave no room for doubt and are immediately identifiable by readers. We

**32** See, for instance, Tiglath-pileser III 05 (http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003418/, last consultation October 2023).
**33** See new edition online: http://oracc.org/rinap/Q004028/ (last consultation October 2023).
**34** Litke 1998.

are not dealing with mysterious and secret names, which would be the privilege of ritual experts, as is perhaps the case with the names of Lamaštu or the dogs in the ritual procedures described above. In the Sennacherib stele, the inscription does not use the root *zakāru* but rather *nabû*, a verbal form which is generally translated as "to call, name, decree". The gods, who are bound to protect the king, are called by their names, summoned to apply each of the curses detailed on the stele, according to their individual prerogatives and skills. These curses are not limited to the present time; they are meant to permanently protect the memory of the king's exploits and to punish anyone who dares to contravene or destroy the *kudurru*. The name (*šūmu*) calls on the divinity and decrees (*nabû*) a mission. Divine action is not circumscribed by the moment and space of the installation ritual; it is also linked to the possibility of a breach of the transaction or the writing itself. This transgression "re-activates" the divine power and requires action. Writing down the divine name not only has the effect of attributing the mission (*nabû*) to the divinity but also providing long-lasting protection thanks to the name being anchored in the materiality of the monument. As *kudurru* are made of stone (diorite, basalt . . .), the inscription endures over time. Reading the cuneiform writing grants those who have this ability a certain power,[35] but the curses remind them that they still belong to the human world and that they are submitted to the divine order whose members assist the king.

The link between written divine names and the materiality of written objects[36] is of utmost importance and guarantees the effectiveness of the curse beyond any time limit (at least theoretically). Divine powers are present, "captured", in all their forms: written and spoken names, weapons, symbols and so on.[37] The divine curse will survive as long as the material support remains intact and the inscription is still visible and legible. This subsequently gives us a better understanding of why doors and walls of official buildings such as temples and palaces were given proper names, which, as we saw in the first part of this analysis, are also descriptions of the expected divine actions.[38] The following example gives the names of all the gates of the new royal city of Dūr-Šarrukīn: this city was built near Nineveh by King Sargon II (722–705 BCE). In his inscriptions, the king revealed all of his plans for what was supposed to be his new capital:

> I made the length of its wall 16,280 cubits and I made its foundation secure upon (blocks of) massive mountain (stone). In front and in back, on both sides, facing the four directions, I opened

**35** Finkel 2010, 9.

**36** Petrovic *et al.* 2018.

**37** Note that there are also some cases where the human is the support for the divine name; the name is inscribed – surely through a tattoo process – on their skin and marks the property of the god, l. 3–5: $^{fd}$*na-na-a-ḫu-us-si-in-ni* / GEME$_2$ *ša$_2$ kak-kab-ti rit-ta-šu$_2$ še-en-di-ti u$_3$* / *a-na* $^{d}$*Na-na-a šaṭ-ra-tu$_4$* "Nanaya-hussini, servant whose hand is marked by the star and is inscribed 'for Nanaya'" (Louvre AO 19536, l. 3–5, juridical document from the reign of Nabonidus).

**38** Yamada 2020.

> eight gates (in the city wall). Then, I named the gate(s) of the gods Šamaš and Adad that face the east "The God Šamaš Is the One Who Makes Me Triumph" (and) "The God Adad Is the One Who Establishes My Prosperity" (respectively). I called the gate(s) of the god Enlil and the goddess Mullissu that face the north "The God Enlil Is the One Who Establishes the Foundation of My City" (85) (and) "The Goddess Mullissu Is the One Who Restores Abundance" (respectively). I made the name(s) of the gate(s) of the god Anu and the goddess Ištar that face the west "The God Anu Is the One Who Makes My Undertakings Successful" (and) "The Goddess Ištar Is the One Who Makes Its People Flourish" (respectively). I pronounced the names of the gate(s) of the god Ea and the goddess Bēlet-ilī that face the south (to be) "The God Ea Is the One Who Keeps Its Spring(s) in Good Order" (and) "The Goddess Bēlet-Ilī Is the One Who Increases Its (Animals') Offspring" (respectively). (90) Its (city) wall was (called) "The God Aššur Is the One Who Prolongs the Reign of Its Royal Builder (and) Protects His Troops." Its outer wall was (called) "The God Ninurta Is the One Who Establishes the Foundation of His City for (All) Days to Come" (Sargon II 9, l. 79b–92a).[39]

All the names of the gates follow the same pattern: each one associates one specific divinity to a power or competence which is supposed to reflect on the king, the city, and/or its population. The wishes – protection, wealth of the population, long reign of the king, etc. – are linked to the architectural function of city gates that must guarantee the integrity of the space and the population that resides within the walls.

Written in the inscriptions that cover the material, the divine name activates the very function of the places or building parts, and puts no time limit on their power. Written names also preserve the power of the individual, even for human beings. In the Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (*SAA* 2 6), the vassals are warned against disrespecting the treaty. Should they do so, they will suffer physically, mentally and socially. Their very existence will be destroyed thanks to the action of the god Nabû:

> May Nabû, bearer of the tablet of fates of the gods, erase your name, and destroy your seed from the land (*Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty*, *SAA* 2 6, l. 660–661).[40]

The god Nabû is the divine patron of writing and is sometimes represented by a single wedge on a clay tablet.[41] His name is derived from the same root as the aforementioned verb *nabû* "to name, to designate". By writing the name on the Tablet of Destinies, a function and a fate is attributed to someone. With the power of writing, Nabû controls human life. Erasing (*pašāṭu*) the name will suppress one's existence and memory. Kings are aware of the fragility of their monuments or the damage caused by erosion and time. Moreover, even on stone, names can be deliberately erased. The curses also apply to those who replace the king's name with their own or those who delete the cuneiform inscription or its drawings.

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**39** Translation taken from http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/corpus/ (last consultation, October 2023, see with the keywords: "Sargon II 9").

**40** $^{d}$PA *na-ši ṭup-pi* NAM-MEŠ DINGIR-MEŠ / MU-*ku-nu lip-ši-ṭi* NUMUN-*ku-nu ina* KUR *lu-ḫal-liq* (edition of the text: http://oracc.org/saao/Q009186/, last consultation October 2023).

**41** Tudeau 2013.

Among all the descriptions of rituals at our disposal in the cuneiform sources, I have not yet come across a case where a divine name as a ritual instruction has been voluntarily erased. However, there is a case in the Akkadian literature where a king maliciously creates a new deity and gives it a name. The *Verse Account of Nabonidus* (BM 38299) was probably composed on a Persian initiative under Cyrus the Great.[42] The entry of the Persians into Babylon in 539 was accompanied by negative propaganda targeting the previous Babylonian king, Nabonidus. The Persians are presented as saviours, sent by the Babylonian gods themselves, such as Marduk the god of Babylon, whereas the Babylonian king, Nabonidus, is depicted as an impious and sacrilegious ruler. This anti-Nabonidus propaganda document describes the last Babylonian king as a disrespectful king, ignorant of the Mesopotamian multi-millennial traditions.

> His protective spirit-*šēdu* became hostile to him (Nabonidus). And he, the former favourite of the gods, is now seized by misfortune. Against the will of the gods, he performed an impure act . . . he had just fashioned wind! [He had made a god] that no one had seen in the country until now [. . .] he made him sit on a pedestal; he gave him the name of Moon (Nannar). Of gold and lapis lazuli, he made him wear a crown; his appearance (*šikinšu*) is that of the eclipse of the moon-Sîn (*Verse Account of Nabonidus,* i 18′–29′; Schaudig 2001, 566–567).

Nabonidus is accused of bringing an unknown deity into the temple of Babylon – chasing away the former divine owner, Marduk. This new divine presence is effective as soon as a statue, symbols and a divine name are established.

## 3 Conclusion

To investigate the ritual uses of divine names in ancient Mesopotamia, I decided to focus on a particular ritual practice, the act of writing the divine name. In prescriptive ritual texts from the 1st millennium BCE, one may find the explicit term translated as “name”, that is MU in Sumerian or *šumu* in Akkadian. This name is selected by the officiant from various other ways to address the gods (there are for instance many epithets, other theonyms, but they selected this one in particular: why? For what ritual purpose was this specific name chosen?). Writing a name that is supposed to be pronounced out loud invites us to consider the link between the name, the material or object on which it is written and its vocal effectiveness in a ritual context. So, by studying the writing of divine names as a ritual act, I wanted to focus on the intention of the officiant, their goals and expected outcomes when they pronounce and write what they understand to be a divine name.

One of the ritual series I studied were those devoted to the demoness Lamaštu. If we have a look at the syntactic construction of her names, they differ slightly from

**42** Beaulieu 1989; Schaudig 2001, 563–578.

the other contemporary anthroponyms. Being longer, they are also programmatic and very close to incantatory formulas or epithets. In one of the procedures, the seven names of Lamaštu differentiate her from the human entities who only have one. They draw a complete portrait of the demoness who must recognise herself in these names. Benevolent agents may also be summoned with these programmatic names. These "incantation-names" are not the common ones used to designate the agents in lists of theonyms or in narrative compositions. They belong to the scholarly lore regarding the divine world and imply specific knowledge.

Writing all the names of a divine entity out during a ritual procedure helps the officiant to encompass all the divine aspects and powers. We will find the same processes in the other papers from the session, such as the contribution by Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui regarding the accumulation of divine onomastics and epithets. In ancient Mesopotamian incantations, we also have litanies – long and comprehensive lists of all the divine names that are read so that the officiant is sure not to miss out any member of the divine assembly. This is also the case in exorcistic rituals in which the exorcist will name all the known demons so as not to forget one of them who could be the true enemy; for instance, in the udug-ḫul / *utukkū lemnūtu* series, the exorcist gives the names for at least 10 demonic agents.[43]

In the examples I studied in my paper, the act of writing is deeply related to the materiality of the object; the name makes the entity present and writing it down adds a temporal dimension to its effectiveness. But the pronunciation and oral characteristic are not forgotten; on the contrary, even if it is written, the name is understood for its vocal feature. To be effective, a name must be pronounced. We may wonder who was supposed to read the inscriptions, as this implied mastering the complex cuneiform writing system. The cuneiform signs help to create this eternal pronunciation, even if there is no audience to give a human voice to them and the reading remains silent. A divine name might then be "spoken" in a mental reading. The *zikir šūmi*, the "pronunciation of the name" is an essential aspect of the ritual writing of divine names. In the ritual procedures of Ancient Mesopotamia, "writing" is considered a different act to "drawing," but written names and iconographical symbols are complementary to each other. They constitute different but interrelated *media*, sharing the same ritual goal: to make the invisible present to the human perception.

**43** Geller 2016.

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