

Radiance and the Power of Erasure in an Obsidian Lamaštu Amulet

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Among the various figurines, pendants, and fragments of cuneiform ritual tablets in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of ancient Near Eastern art is a nearly pristine obsidian amulet of the first millennium B.C.¹ This amulet, small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand, provides protection from the Mesopotamian demon Lamaštu. On one side is a representation of the demon surrounded by various ritual paraphernalia (fig. 1), and on the other, a ritual incantation carved in cuneiform script (fig. 2). In its current display—mounted flat against a beige cloth support—the opacity of the obsidian's dark color makes it difficult to see the image and also precludes any observation of the text. When the amulet is examined at close range, however, one is able to see how brilliantly light reflects off the surface and gets a

fig. 1 Amulet with a Lamaštu Demon. Mesopotamia or Iran, ca. early 1st millennium B.C. Obsidian, $2\frac{1}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{16} \times \frac{3}{16}$ in. (5.7 × 4.7 × 0.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, James N. Spear Gift, 1984 (1984.348)



If figurines embodying ritual change, like the *urdimmu* pendant described above, were adorned with obsidian to facilitate appeals to the gods, it is not unreasonable to imagine that amulets made of the same material were similarly conceived. Such an inference, however, still leaves a lacuna in the discussion—namely, how the material itself, situated within a framework of ritual and mythological associations, constituted the apotropaic effect ascribed to it. By its very nature, obsidian's materiality facilitated a type of human-object intimacy: while large blocks of the stone were cultivated for use in architecture or statuary, it was generally traded in small blocks meant for jewelry or amulets.⁴⁰ The body itself thus became an essential component of the formula. Indeed, it has been argued that amulets, or at least amuletic texts inscribed on clay, stone, or metal tablets, required proximity to the spaces they were intended to protect in order to function properly.⁴¹ By extension, amulets such as the Museum's Lamaštu amulet are necessarily dependent on their proximity to the body and on the body's sensory responses to be effective.

Careful observation of the Museum's amulet reveals a highly luminous refraction of light at the break in the upper right corner. Its smooth, polished surface yields varying degrees of luster, depending on how the amulet is held or moved. From a frontal position, the amulet appears opaque. The density of the obsidian's darkness from this position makes it challenging to see Lamaštu and the surrounding items, since they are carved in the negative. It becomes necessary to handle the amulet to see each with more clarity. Both the luster and the darkness of the obsidian thus contribute critically to the variable occlusion and revelation of text and image.

What is more significant for its use as a magical ornament is its transformation from a nearly opaque black stone to a translucent one when held to the light

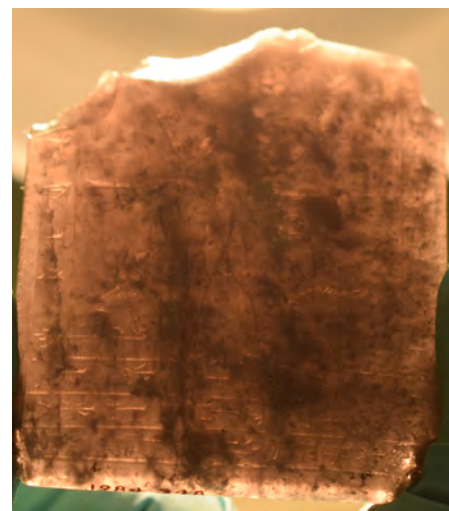


fig. 5 Amulet with a Lamaštu Demon (fig. 1) illuminated by a light source

(fig. 5). Doing so reveals several inclusions in its material fabric, which, along with its now diffused translucence, nearly obscure the figure of Lamaštu and the incantation text. One can imagine ancient artisans deliberately exploiting the natural properties of the stone, both its brightness and its murky striations, to enhance the very nature of the fearsome demon being kept at bay.⁴² As the incantation literature expressively describes, “The small of her back is speckled like a leopard, her cheek is yellowish and pale like ochre.”⁴³

This phenomenon is not unique to the Museum's amulet: recently published scholarship from the Yale Babylonian Collection at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History (YBC) includes photographic evidence of a similar effect occurring in one of its own obsidian Lamaštu amulets (fig. 6).⁴⁴ Only two centimeters wide and about twice that in height, the YBC amulet depicts a more schematically executed Lamaštu—accompanied by many of her standard accoutrements, composed from a series of geometric shapes. On the reverse is a five-line inscription, although its quality is worse than that of the Metropolitan Museum amulet, and not all the sign forms are legible.⁴⁵ When the YBC amulet is exposed to light, the sign forms and figural imagery lose their clarity and articulation. Flow bands cut across the image and text at thirty-eight degrees from the horizontal axis of the amulet, rendering both unclear.⁴⁶ In addition to these natural bands, the object's thinness allows the guidelines organizing the inscription to become visible and to cut across the image of Lamaštu on the opposite side. The bright illumination, appearance of inclusions, and coalescence of incised details on both sides of these obsidian amulets facilitate a fundamental shift in the character of the carved images.

LAMAŠTU AS ŠALMU, AND TEXT AS VISUAL IMAGE

Representation in Assyria of the first millennium B.C. was concerned less with mimetic veracity to nature—a construct in art historical scholarship resulting from a long history of prioritizing western theories of image production and aesthetics—than with an overriding interest in the power and efficacy vested in representational forms. The Akkadian term *šalmu* is generally understood as “image” by modern art historians and applies to specific monuments, like statues.⁴⁷ However, its application to nonfigural forms complicates the meaning of *šalmu*, which may be better understood as “manifestation.” Visual representations were linked intrinsically to their referent in reality, and the term *šalmu* “maintains the connotation of a physical rendering of unique and essential identity.”⁴⁸ Thus, images of

fig. 6 Amulet with a Lamaštu Demon. Neo-Assyrian(?), early 1st millennium B.C. Obsidian, approx. H. 1¾ in. (4.5 cm), W. 1½ in. (2.8 cm). Yale Babylonian Collection, Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven (YPM BC 011147)



Lamaštu on amulets were not merely representational, and did not function simply to identify from whom or what the amulet protected a wearer. The inclusion of Lamaštu sought to effect change on the demon goddess herself. Indeed, images in Mesopotamia do not simply represent, they make things happen.

Looking at its components and how they interact with the *šalmu* of Lamaštu, it is possible to produce a plausible interpretation of how the Museum's obsidian amulet functioned. The content of the Sumerian incantation both placates Lamaštu and invokes the names and powers of beneficent gods to mitigate her activities. The content of the text, however, is not the only significant aspect of the inscription in operation here. The bold and precise lapidary style underscores the apotropaic purpose of the amulet, as the clarity of the signs makes the incantation vividly present, both in terms of legibility and in materializing the text on the obsidian.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the amulet's overall form constitutes a recognizable field of importance. According to Nils Heessel, square-shaped tablets with a protruding flange act as a formal signal that draws one's attention to the locus of the text.⁵⁰ The space within the “square and flange” orientation signals that magically efficacious words “lie here.” This visual-spatial technique sidesteps the need to read the inscription if one lacked the ability to do so, and it emphasizes the material manifestation of the text and its inherent power.⁵¹

Ritual instructions in several passages of the incantation series describe making a clay figurine of Lamaštu, binding her, and enclosing her within a “magic circle.” She remains captive until the figurine is buried or otherwise destroyed, indicating that bounding or binding was a critical aspect of Lamaštu's expulsion process.⁵² Given this information, the orientation of the text on the front of the amulet, framing the image of Lamaštu, can be regarded as a deliberate, not arbitrary, strategy. The inscription begins on the back and is read from top to bottom, left to right. To move to the next “side” of the text, as is typical when reading cuneiform tablets, one turns the tablet on its horizontal axis (as opposed to its vertical axis, in the way we turn the pages of modern books). Thus flipped, the text is properly oriented for reading, with the image inverted. The inscription continues onto the left side of the amulet, which necessitates turning it ninety degrees to the right. The final two lines of the inscription appear in parallel, one above Lamaštu and one below. To then orient the image properly, with Lamaštu standing upright, one must turn the amulet once more, ninety degrees to the right. This clever arrangement of text and image not only acts as a frame that situates and binds Lamaštu to the visual plane, but it effectively forces the bearer of the amulet to turn the object in a manner that mimics the ritual binding practices described in the text. The arrangement produces a magical square that surrounds the demon and operates as an equivalent to the “magical circle” mentioned in rituals.

MELAMMU AND THE POWER OF RADIANCE

Within a constellation of Mesopotamian aesthetic phenomena, radiance was by no means just an attractive quality of specific valuable materials. Certainly, it enhanced the value and status of objects and of the people associated with them. However, a deeper understanding of radiance is possible when considering the selection of obsidian as the material support onto which an image of Lamaštu was incised. Once the powerful demon was confined to this magically charged plane through representation and incantation, her image could be erased through the luminescent qualities inherent in the obsidian, a burst of radiance that would have been recognized as the manifestation of divine power—the *melammu*.

As mentioned above, references to methods of production are not available in the cuneiform record. A connection between radiance, obsidian, and amuletic power, derived from visual analysis, is, however, plausible within broader scholarly contexts of Mesopotamian art and literature. *Melammu* was understood in antiquity as a radiance of divine origin, sometimes conceived of as a

dazzling nimbus or crown, and it was often paired with the Akkadian term *puluḫtu*, “terror.”⁵³ *Melammu* is described as emanating from everything touched by divine power, so godly weapons, symbols, temples, and other sanctified spaces were also believed to be in possession of *melammu*. A critical aspect of *melammu* lies in its ability to be manipulated: it was a power that could be given as well as taken away. Textual evidence reveals that the gods bestowed this radiance upon the king as one of the many markers of his rule.⁵⁴ Monsters and demons could, and did, possess *melammu*, and the presence or absence of this power played an important role in bolstering or impeding their strength. In the Babylonian creation myth *Enūma Eliš*, Tiamat, the primordial goddess of chaos and mother of creation, bestows divine radiance upon her monstrous children and essentially turns them into gods.⁵⁵ In early versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Humbaba, the monstrous, divinely appointed guardian of the cedar forest, has seven terrifying auras that he uses as weapons to impede the hero Gilgamesh from cutting down a tree. It is only after Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu, trick Humbaba into giving up these auras that the monster becomes vulnerable to death.⁵⁶

Mythological narratives and royal inscriptions make clear that the presence of *melammu* is correlated with more power, and its absence or usurpation, with less. The resulting vulnerability facilitates the vanquishing of monsters, rebellious deities, and enemies.⁵⁷ Lamaštu is similarly susceptible to the effects of *melammu*. Her place in the heavens as a daughter of Anu was taken from her, along with many of its attendant rights and capabilities. As an entity that has been subject to limitations on her power, she is more closely positioned, cosmically, to the class of monsters in Mesopotamian literature most directly affected by the usurpation or gifting of *melammu*. It is thus plausible that radiance as it appears in concrete form could be used as a weapon against her, especially when Mesopotamian image theory and notions of *šalmu* are brought to bear on the results of exposing the visual image to light. Apprehending the material form is no longer just about deciphering the image; rather, the light changes its fundamental state of being.

It is not unreasonable to imagine that, in the ancient imagination, obsidian’s capacity for transmitting light and inducing visual erasure resulted from a quality bestowed upon the material by divine powers at work. In the case of the Museum’s Lamaštu amulet, radiance can be present in certain conditions, but it should be noted that these conditions are within the control of the wearer of the amulet, not the creature represented therein. In

this case, Lamaštu lacks the agency to claim the radiance for herself. She will always be subjugated by the phenomenal power of radiance, the *melammu*, inherent in the obsidian itself. The anchoring principle of the framing incantation, meanwhile, ensures the continuance of this state of perpetual exorcism. The intersection of representational strategies that physically locate Lamaštu within the visual plane; the entrapping texts; the materiality, luminosity, and erasing properties of obsidian; and an understanding of radiance as a divine endowment that can transform the capabilities of demons and monsters all coalesce in a reading of this amulet, specifically, the *how* of its efficacy. It is an extraordinary amount of information to glean from a single object.

Scholars of Mesopotamian magic often look to such objects as a means of analyzing information contained in the cuneiform literature. Even within a museum context, these pieces are displayed in glass cases, engendering a practice of seeing magical items at a remove from their intended use and outside their cultural networks, making it difficult to conceptualize how they functioned. Although there is an unbridgeable gap between modern and ancient engagement with the material world, heuristic analysis led to several of the insights discussed above. Although Lamaštu amulets have always been spoken of as a coherent group, differences in material, scale, depth of carving, and weight, among other properties, variably and significantly influence an object’s agency and possible interpretations of its ancient functionality. This study highlights the need for focused, individual object study. The Museum’s Lamaštu amulet embodies a form of Mesopotamian magical technology only partially accessible while on display, and reveals the deliberate choices made by Near Eastern artisans in their efforts to produce highly concentrated objects of magical change.

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NOTES

1 Farber 2014, p. 258, fig. 21; Harper 1985.

2 Winter 1994.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

4 Winter 2012, p. 160.

5 Farber 1983.

6 The term *apotropaion* has its roots in the Greek verb *ἀποτρέπειν*, “to turn away from,” or “to avert.” See Faraone 1992, p. 4.

7 Farber 2014, p. 39.

8 Assyriologists infer this latter interpretation from tablet II of the Atra-hasis myth, in which the god Enlil regularly decimates the human population through famine, drought, and other calamities. One of the destructive forces is referred to as the Pāšittu, “The Exterminator,” an epithet ascribed to Lamaštu in first-millennium B.C. incantations. For further discussion, see Lambert and Millard 1969.

9 See Farber 2014, pp. 67–342, for most recent text editions.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

11 To date, ninety-seven amulets are catalogued in various publications. See Klengel 1960; Klengel 1961; Farber 1983; Farber 1989; Wiggermann 1992; Farber 1997; Green 1997; Farber 1998; Wiggermann 2000; Götting 2011; Farber 2014; and lasenovskaia 2019.

12 Graff 2014, p. 265.

13 Wiggermann 2000, p. 219.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

15 Götting 2011, pp. 442–46.

16 Barjamovic 2015, p. 68.

17 Horowitz 1992, p. 114. See also Van Dijk 1983.

18 Yalvaç 1965, p. 330.

19 For an overview of Pazuzu, see Heessel 2002.

20 Translation and transliteration by Wilfred Lambert, as noted in the curatorial file for this object, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, MMA. This transliteration sometimes deviates from that provided in Farber 2014, pp. 114–16. The difficulties with the text, as noted in Farber’s commentary on pp. 243–44, may account for these differences in reading.

21 Farber 1995, pp. 1901–7.

22 Mirelman 2018, p. 356.

23 Rapp 2009, p. 85.

24 Moorey 1994, pp. 63–64.

25 Healey 2013, p. 251.

26 Cassin 1968, pp. 3–4.

27 Healey 2013, p. 252. For the Tell Arpachiyah necklace, see Mallowan and Rose 1935, p. 97.

28 Moorey 1994, p. 64.

29 Frahm, Lassen, and Wagenonner 2019, p. 984.

30 Woolley 1934, pp. 73–91.

31 *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (CAD), vol. 16, § (Chicago, 1962), pp. 257ff.

32 Moorey 1994, p. 71. In commenting on the rarity of worked obsidian objects from the first millennium B.C., Moorey cites the Museum’s Lamaštu amulet as an exceptional survivor from antiquity. There are two additional examples in the British Museum, London (BM 127371, BM 132520), one in the Yale Babylonian Collection, Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven (NBC 08151), and one in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (AO 8184). One amulet previously in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago is now in a private collection, and another was last photographed in 1982 in Tehran, but its current location is unknown; see Farber 2014, p. 338, fig. 22, and pls. 91 (Lam. Amulet no. 95) and 90 (Lam. amulet no. 94).

33 In addition to its designation of obsidian, the word *šurru* could also refer to flint.

34 *Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD), vol. 16, §, p. 259.

35 Grayson 1991, p. 29.

36 Winckler 1889, pp. 125–26.

37 Reiner 1995, p. 128.

38 Abusch and Schwemer 2016, p. 226.

39 *Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD), vol. 16, §, p. 258.

40 Sparks 2001, p. 96.

41 Heessel 2014, pp. 70–71.

42 Patrick Crowley proposes a similar and compelling description of the so-called Getty Aphrodite (formerly J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 88.AA.76), wherein the materiality of rock crystal signified the goddess’s liquid origins, and operated to further enhance a notion and experience of her that had been formed from the crystal. Crowley notes the presence of cloudy striations on her thighs, what gemologists call “fluid inclusions,” and argues that these trapped bands of tiny bubbles may in fact have been a *prized* asset to the sculpture, acting like small birthmarks that “dramatized the titular epiphany of the goddess in her imagistic form.” See Crowley 2016, pp. 238–39.

43 Farber 2014, p. 169. Lam. II, Inc. 7: “*kima nimri tukkupā kalātūša / kima kale lēssa arqat.*”

44 Frahm, Lassen, and Wagenonner 2019, p. 982. This effect appears limited to amulets made from obsidian. It should be noted that Lamaštu amulets were made from a variety of materials, but it is this author’s position that art historical interpretation should be conditional upon the specific parameters of objects as individual case studies. Analysis of metals and other stones through phenomenological frameworks could potentially yield different and fruitful results.

45 Farber 1989, pp. 96–97.

46 Frahm, Lassen, and Wagenonner 2019, p. 982.

47 Winter 1997, pp. 364–69.

48 Feldman 2009, p. 46.

49 The topic of literacy in ancient Mesopotamia is expansive in contemporary scholarship, and beyond the scope of this article. For an overview, see Wilcke 2000; Charpin 2004; and Veldhuis 2011.

50 Heessel 2014, p. 73.

51 Although touched upon briefly in this article, the complexities of magical writing in antiquity—including but not limited to audience literacy, visibility and access, and pseudo-scripts—are vast and numerous, as is the attendant scholarship. For an overview of magical texts and writing in both antique and medieval contexts, see contributions in Abusch and van der Toorn 1999; Boschung and Bremmer 2015; and Frankfurter 2019. See also Skemer 2006.

52 Farber 2014, p. 151: Rit. 3, line 56: “You bind her to a *baltu* (and/or) an *ašāgu* thorn bush. You surround her three times with a magic circle.” *Circle* in these instances simply means “enclosing ring (of any shape),” rather than being geometrically defined.

53 Oppenheim 1943, p. 31. See also *puluḫtu* in the *Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD), vol. 12, P (2005), pp. 505ff.

54 Oppenheim 1943, p. 31: “they (the gods) give him sceptre, throne and the *palū*-symbol and they adorn him with the royal *melammu* (*ú-za-a'-nu-šu-ma me-lam šarru-u-ti*).”

55 Lambert 2013, pp. 58–59.

56 George 1999, pp. 149–66.

57 Ataç 2007, pp. 306–8.

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