



ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Perceiving and Exorcising Threats in Ancient Mesopotamia: A Typology of Amulets

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Abstract

Ancient Mesopotamians lived in a world peopled by invisible, unpredictable forces, believed to be concretely able to influence the lives of individuals and communities, by being interpreted as the unseen causes to measurable effects, such as (but not limitedly to) sickness, plague, misfortune, miscarriage, death. A complex system of ritual practices was thus set in place, to exorcise those evil influxes and to protect individuals, fractions of society (e.g., soldiers), entire communities, and the spaces they live in or habitually frequent. Talismans built for this purpose are known since Prehistory and outlive the Mesopotamian cultures, being still used in the Islamic world. Amulets thus become tangible cultural markers of the perception of danger and uncertainty, exercising their apotropaic and tutelary function either on people, worn or carried by individuals from childbirth to the grave, or on the places they are set to protect, as far as cities, public spaces (e.g., temples), private houses and rooms are concerned. A typology of Mesopotamian amulets from the 4th to the 1st millennium BCE can therefore be proposed, considering features like shape, decoration (e.g., inscribed, iconic, aniconic, geometric), size, placement, color, and material.

Keywords

Amulets, Demons, Typology, Apotropaia, Talismans

Session

4. The materiality of inscribed and figurative objects

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