

Nergal: The shaping of the god Mars
in Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon

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Abstract

By examining the attributes and characteristics assigned to the Mesopotamian god *Nergal* by Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians, this dissertation focuses on the Mesopotamian deities that were conflated and syncretized to create the Neo-Babylonian version of the god *Nergal*. The main deities examined in this dissertation are *Nergal*, *Meslamtaea*, *Ninazu*, and *Erra*. Moreover, the Sumerian god *Ninurta* and the Greek hero-god Herakles are also examined because *Nergal* was deemed to be partly assimilated with *Ninurta* and with Herakles.¹

Along with the work of scholars of Assyriology and Mesopotamian history, primary sources from Mesopotamia (mainly myths, inscriptions, poems, and astrological reports) attesting the attributes or the characteristics of the god *Nergal*, are used to investigate whether the planet Mars (Ares in Greek) was syncretized or derived from *Nergal*. To assess whether the astrological meaning attributed to Mars in Mesopotamia was transmitted to Hellenistic astrologers, myths related to the Greek god Ares and attributes of Mars cited in the extant works of Hellenistic astrologers are compared with the attributes associated with Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian diviners.

Introduction

In Mesopotamia, *Nergal* was most likely promoted during the Sargonic period (ca. 2300-2200 BCE) by the Assyrian king Naram-sin, Sargon's grandson. Cuneiform texts credit *Nergal* as the god behind Naram-sin's conquests. Naram-sin created one of the first empires of history and was the first Mesopotamian ruler to proclaim

¹ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1991]), p. 325.

himself a god.² Most likely, the feats of Naram-sin indirectly promoted the god *Nergal*.

In the third millennium BCE, Nergal was a warrior and death-inflicting god who had nothing to do with the underworld, and who was not present in Sumer (south); during that millennium, the identity of *Nergal* was different from that of *Meslamtaea*,³ a god who might have had chthonian aspects. In fact, Sumer had the god *Ninazu* as a prominent underworld god. *Nergal*, however, during the second millennium BCE assimilated *Meslamtaea* and became an underworld god replacing *Ninazu* from the Sumerian underworld pantheon. Later, the myth known as ‘Nergal and Ereshkigal’ explained that *Nergal* married the queen of the Netherworld implying that Nergal seemed to reach the top of the Netherworld pantheon.

In Babylon, the god *Nergal* was associated with the planet Mars. *Nergal* was a god of war, a fighter, a hero, and also a god of death, plague, and ruler of underworld. In fact, according to a doctrine in Hellenistic astrology, Mars was a god of war, death, and plagues. Ptolemy attested that Mars was “assigned Scorpio and Aries, having a similar nature, and, agreeably to Mars’ destructive nature and inharmonious quality”.⁴ Since astrological reports by Assyrian astrologers mentioned similar characteristics of Mars, the purpose of this research is to investigate the attributes that were associated with Nergal in Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria, and compare those attributes with the characteristics associated with Mars in the extant works of Hellenistic astrologers.

Literature review

Egbert von Weiher found five main attributes of the god Nergal: underworld, war, light, as star, and plague.⁵ According to W. G. Lambert, the attribute of light should

² Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd edition (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), [hereafter Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*], pp. 51-2.

³ Gwendolyn Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.118.

⁴ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. and translated by F. E. Robbins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971 [1940]), Book I 17, p. 81.

⁵ Egbert von Weiher, *Der babilonische Gott Nergal, Alter Orient und Altes Testament, Band 11* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1971), pp. 3-105.

be suppressed arguing that the passages selected by von Weiher are not specific to Nergal but to any deity.⁶

Gwendolyn Leick argues that *Nergal* was not from Sumer but seemed to be a Babylonian god because the etymology of the name *Nergal* is not Sumerian but Akkadian.⁷ Dina Katz presumes that *Nergal* evolved from a god of war to a netherworld god, and contends that *Nergal* became a major netherworld god from the Old Babylonian period onwards while his position as a heavenly god declined;⁸ and also that by the Middle Babylonian period (1500-1000 BCE) *Nergal* was considered the spouse of *Ereshkigal*, the Queen of the Netherworld.⁹ According to F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Nergal* was associated first with the bull and later with the lion,¹⁰ and was considered a god who inflicted death to all life, human and animal, either by supernatural means such as plague or simply by supporting the king's arms.¹¹

Lambert argues that the Sumerian god of the infernal regions was *Ninazu* whereas *Nergal* was originally an Akkadian god lord of Kutha.¹² J.J.M. Roberts argues that *Nergal* was a Sumerian god of the city of Kutha who was identified with *Erra* by the Akkadians: the Sumerian name became popular in Akkadian circles and gradually pushed *Erra* into the background in Akkadian texts.¹³ Jeremy Black and Anthony Green argue that *Nergal* and *Erra* were originally separate gods who went under the name *Nergal* in the first millennium BCE; according to Black and Green, *Nergal* adopted many of the features of *Erra*, a violent warlike god responsible for plagues,

⁶ W. G. Lambert, 'Studies in Nergal', *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30, 1973, p. 356.

⁷ Gwendolyn Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.127.

⁸ Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003), pp. 339, 360.

⁹ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 363.

¹⁰ F. A. M. Wiggermann, 'Nergal. B. Archäologisch.', in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie: Neunter Band* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998-2001), [hereafter Wiggermann, 'Nergal. B'], pp. 223.

¹¹ F. A. M. Wiggermann, 'Nergal. A. Philologisch.', in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie: Neunter Band* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998-2001), [hereafter Wiggermann, 'Nergal. A'], pp. 221.

¹² W. G. Lambert, 'The Theology of Death', in *Death in Mesopotamia: XXXVIe Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Mesopotamia Copenhagen Studies in Assyriologie volume 8* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), p. 62.

¹³ J.J.M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon: A Study of the Semitic Deities Attested in Mesopotamia before Ur III* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1972), p.150.

fevers, famine, and forest fires.¹⁴ To Thorkild Jacobsen, *Erra* was a god of scorched earth, raids, and riots, who was syncretized with *Nergal*, god of war, sudden death, and ruler of the world of the dead.¹⁵ Roberts argues that *Erra* was Akkadian, not Sumerian, and the name *Erra* was first attested in the Sargonic period as a theophoric element in Akkadian personal names, and remained a popular theophoric element in Akkadian names through the Old Babylonian period (1950-1500 BCE).¹⁶ To Roberts, *Erra* was mostly portrayed as a warrior whose main weapons were famine and, to a lesser degree, plague. Roberts admits that scholars refer commonly to *Erra* as a god of pestilence.¹⁷ Peter Machinist and J. M. Sasson present a double nature of *Erra*: first a wild and destructive warrior, second a sleepy and inactive god who was very hard to arouse.¹⁸ Jeffrey L. Cooley surmises that the author of ‘*Erra and Ishum*’ drew to some extent on the Mesopotamian science of celestial divination.¹⁹ David Brown argues that in ‘*Erra and Ishum*’ *Erra* attempted to seize control of Babylon from *Marduk*, and presumes that if *Erra* was Mars, Jupiter was *Marduk*, and the *Sebetti* were the Pleiades, as it was accepted in the Neo-Assyrian period, then ‘the myth could be interpreted (partly) as a description of the behavior of these heavenly bodies’.²⁰ Lorenzo Verderame argues that the Pleiades were equated with the Seven demons and were often associated with the planet Mars as astral god of the Netherworld.²¹ Verderame considers that when the Akkadian term to refer to the Seven demons, *Sebēttu* or *Sibitti*, appeared in astrological omens the tone of the omen became bellicose portending attack of the enemy, siege of city, or exercise of power.²²

¹⁴ Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: British Museum Press, 1998 [1992]), pp. 135-6.

¹⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), [hereafter Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*], p. 227.

¹⁶ J. J. M. Roberts, ‘*Erra: Scorched Earth*’, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 / 2 (1971), pp. 12-3.

¹⁷ Roberts, ‘*Erra: Scorched Earth*’, pp. 13-4.

¹⁸ Peter Machinist, J. M. Sasson, ‘Rest and Violence in the Poem of *Erra*’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 103, No. 1, (Jan. - Mar., 1983), pp. 221-226.

¹⁹ Jeffrey L. Cooley, “‘I Want to Dim the Brilliance of Šulpae!’” Mesopotamian Celestial Divination and the Poem of “*Erra and Išum*”, *Iraq*, Vol. 70 (2008), p. 179.

²⁰ David Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology: Cuneiform Monographs 18* (Groningen: Styx, 2000), p. 256.

²¹ Lorenzo Verderame, ‘Pleiades in Ancient Mesopotamia’, in *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 16, No 4 (2016), p. 112.

²² Verderame, ‘Pleiades in Ancient Mesopotamia’, p. 112.

Michael Baigent argues that *Nergal* was a god of war, plague, fevers, and pestilence, who was identified by Mesopotamian astrologers with Mars.²³ Ulla Koch-Westenholz edited a Neo-Assyrian astrological-astronomical compendium known as the ‘Great Star List’, which contained most of the attributes of *Nergal* that have come down to us.²⁴ J. L. Cooley²⁵ uses the same compendium, and Frances Reynolds gathers textual evidence, mainly from that compendium, attesting that Mars was an unpropitious planet in Mesopotamia, and argues that Mars was linked with destructive natural forces, such as plague, death, and fire; the latter due to the red color of the planet.²⁶

Name and images of the god *Nergal*

By the third millennium BCE, the earliest Sumerian spelling of *Nergal* was dKIŠ.UNU , a spelling which, by the late third millennium, evolved to dKIŠ.UNU.GAL .²⁷ The element KIŠ denoted a bull’s head, and KIŠ.UNU spelled Kutha, a city which was the main cult center of *Nergal*,²⁸ located around 25 miles northeast of Babylon. In Sumerian hymns, *Nergal* was commonly described as a victorious bull; in fact, one of the earliest names of *Nergal* was a ‘bull whose great strength cannot be repulsed’.²⁹ Wiggermann argues that the image of the victorious bull recurred among his names and in Sumerian texts, but it was less prominent in later Akkadian ones.³⁰

Later on, however, *Nergal* was associated with the lion, which is attested in *Nergal*’s scimitar. According to Green, the scimitar of *Nergal* was either single, often with a

²³ Michael Baigent, *Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Science of the Omens and the Knowledge of the Heavens* (Rochester: Bear & Company, 2015 [1994]), chapter 12.

²⁴ Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1995), pp. 187-205.

²⁵ J. L. Cooley, ‘Propaganda, Prognostication, and Planets’, in *Divination, Politics, & Ancient Near Eastern Empires* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), p. 20.

²⁶ Frances Reynolds, ‘Unpropitious Titles of Mars in Mesopotamian Scholarly Tradition’, in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale* (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic Oriental Institute, 1998), p. 347.

²⁷ Wiggermann, ‘Nergal. A’, p. 215.

²⁸ Wiggermann, ‘Nergal. A’, p. 215.

²⁹ Wiggermann, ‘Nergal. A’, p. 218.

³⁰ Wiggermann, ‘Nergal. B’, p. 223.

lion's head or a lion-demon's head, or double with the heads of lion-demons.³¹ According to Wiggermann, *Nergal* was compared with a lion and addressed to as a lion, and demons such as the Lion Dragon (*Ukaduhhû*) and the forerunner of the Lion Demon (*Ugallu*) served as executors of the will of *Nergal*. Those demons, however, were not exclusive to *Nergal*.³² It seems that whenever *Nergal* was associated with demons during the late second and early first millennium BCE, those demons were most likely portrayed with leonine features. Edith Porada argues that the death-dealing gods in Mesopotamia, during the second millennium BCE, were depicted carrying weapons which ended in lion heads, or as humans with bull ears or other animal features; similarly, during the late second and early first millennium BCE, death dealing gods were mostly depicted as demons with leonine features.³³ According to Black and Green, the Lion Demon (often depicted on Old-Babylonian seals holding a man upside down from one leg) not only represented an attendant of *Nergal*, but was a bringer of disease.³⁴ Black surmises that in ancient Mesopotamia the causes of disease were often ascribed to the work of gods or demons (acting as the agents of gods) for the punishment of sin.³⁵ Summarizing, during the third millennium BCE *Nergal* seemed to be represented as a bull. During the second millennium and early first millennium BCE, *Nergal* was represented as a lion, and lions were commonly associated with demons, which were considered as bringers of disease. Hence, in Mesopotamia, *Nergal* was a death dealing god bringer of disease, which was caused either by demons or by *Nergal* directly, and those demons were portrayed with leonine features.

History of the formation of the god *Nergal*

During the Old Akkadian period (2500-2000 BCE), *Nergal* as a god of war can be attested beyond Mesopotamia: in Akkadian and Hurrian inscriptions *Nergal* was

³¹ Anthony Green, 'Mischwesen. B', in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie: Achter Band* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993-1997), [hereafter Green, 'Mischwesen B'], p. 251.

³² Wiggermann, 'Nergal. B', pp. 223-5.

³³ Edith Porada, 'The Iconography of Death in Mesopotamia in the Early Second Millenium B.C.', in *Death in Mesopotamia: XXXVIe Recontre assyriologique internationale*, Mesopotamia Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology volume 8 (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), p. 259.

³⁴ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 121.

³⁵ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 67.

referred to with the epithet ‘killer’, or ‘conqueror of rivals’, in the foundation inscription recording the building of a temple by Atalsen, king of Ukriš and Nawar.³⁶ *Nergal* seemed to have been promoted by the Sargonid kings (c. 2350 – 2150 BCE) together with his cult centre at Kutha.³⁷ From the time of Naram-sin (reigned c. 2254 – 2218 BCE) onwards, *Nergal* was known as the head of the pantheon of Kutha.³⁸ An inscription from a stone monument in the temple of Sin at Ur credited *Nergal* with the success of Naram-sin’s campaign against Armanum and Ebla.³⁹ The historical document known as ‘Naram-Sin in the Cedar Mountain’, explained that *Nergal* helped Naram-sin to conquer several territories:

the god Nergal did open up the path for the mighty Naram-Sin, and gave him Arman and Ebla, and he presented him also with the Amanus, the Cedar Mountain and (with) the Upper Sea [...].⁴⁰

Katz argues that the successful campaigns of Naram-sin accentuated *Nergal*’s warlike character and facilitated *Nergal*’s penetration in the Akkadian provinces of the northwest.⁴¹ According to Katz, however, the prominent position of *Nergal* during Naram-sin’s reign was not maintained by his successors.⁴² *Nergal*’s cult began to penetrate the Sumerian cult centers in the south during the Ur III period (c. 2100-2000 BCE), when the cult of *Meslamtaea* was still dominant; *Nergal* began to be mentioned in texts from southern Sumerian centers only from Šulgi’s time (reigned c. 2029-1982 BCE).⁴³ The association of weapons and blood with *Nergal*, such as line 119 of Šulgi’s hymn X, which reads ‘Like *Nergal*, your weapon consumed blood’⁴⁴ certainly makes of *Nergal* a warrior god. Katz argues that

³⁶ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 412.

³⁷ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, pp. 127-8.

³⁸ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 363.

³⁹ Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1996), [hereafter Foster, *Before the Muses 2nd edition*], p. 55.

⁴⁰ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 268.

⁴¹ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 412.

⁴² Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, pp. 412-3.

⁴³ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 351.

⁴⁴ Jacob Klein, *Three Šulgi Hymns: Sumerian Royal Hymns Glorifying King Šulgi of Ur* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1981), pp. 142-3.

the intense military activity carried out by Šulgi, and its own deification (Šulgi's) could explain the incorporation of Nergal into the gods revered by Šulgi.⁴⁵

According to Katz, the naturalization of *Nergal* in southern Sumer was generated by Šulgi as a premeditated act focused on the military success of Naram-sim in order to demonstrate that *Nergal* was militarily more capable than *Meslamtaea*. Katz argues that *Meslamtaea* was a chthonic god (perhaps a young fertility-god) with a war-like aspect,⁴⁶ and surmises that

when Šulgi added Nergal as a warlike god to the circle of the gods that he venerated, they (Nergal and *Meslamtaea*) were worshipped in Kutha side by side.⁴⁷

According to Jacobsen, *Meslamtaea* belonged to a pantheon of Sumerian city-gods of farming regions; a pantheon in which the male gods tended to be fierce warriors, warlike, with chthonian aspects, and belonging to a single divine family stemming from *Enlil* of Nippur.⁴⁸ According to Katz, *Meslamtaea* was finally assimilated with *Nergal* in the second millennium BCE.⁴⁹ To Jacobsen, *Nergal* became a major figure in the pantheon during the second millennium BCE when Assyria and Babylon arose as national states and the gods *Marduk* of Babylon and *Ashur* of Assyria became the head of the new pantheon, and the older gods receded, remaining prominent but with less power.⁵⁰ During the second millennium BCE, *Nergal* most likely penetrated in southern Sumer, assimilated *Meslamtaea*, and became a major god in the pantheon of Babylon and Assyria.

Meslamtaea was usually coupled with *Lugal-irra*. *Lugal-irra* and *Meslamtaea* were twin gods considered hypostases of Nergal,⁵¹ and a duo of gods with netherworld

⁴⁵ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 418.

⁴⁶ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 417.

⁴⁷ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 417.

⁴⁸ Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 30-1.

⁴⁹ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, p. 351.

⁵⁰ Jacobsen, *Toward the image of Tammuz and other Essays*, p. 35.

⁵¹ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian Period*, Cuneiform Monographs 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 341.

associations.⁵² First encountered as a pair in a hymnic cycle naming Ibbi-Sîn, last king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100-2000 BCE), Lambert argues that *Meslamtaea* and *Lugal-irra* both dealt with the river that separated the dead from the living and that gave access to the netherworld.⁵³ According to Erika Reiner and David Pingree, tablet K.42 attests that ‘*Lugal-irra* and *Meslamtaea* (are) Mercury and Mars’.⁵⁴ Since *Meslamtaea* had clear underworld links, by assimilating *Meslamtaea Nergal* began to play a role in the netherworld.

As son of *Enlil*, *Nergal* seemed to be identified with destruction and war. Jacobsen argues that the ‘Hymn to Enlil’ showed *Enlil* as a benefactor of man and all life on earth, and described *Enlil*’s authority and power making the other gods recognize him as their lord and master of the city of Nippur.⁵⁵ Alberto R. W. Green argues that *Enlil* was often portrayed as the violent warrior who gave kingship to the land.⁵⁶ Nippur and *Enlil* were recognized as a source of rule over Sumer as a whole; and any new king of Sumer needed the recognition of Nippur rather than that of his own city, concluded Jacobsen.⁵⁷ Tablet BM 100042 described *Nergal* not only as a great warrior, as a hero, fierce, broad and high, but as junior of *Enlil*.⁵⁸ *Nergal* may have inherited his warrior attributes from *Enlil*, who was considered a warrior who can bring destruction.⁵⁹ Tablet BE39099, a version of the Atra-hasis myth⁶⁰ from the Late Babylonian period (600 BCE–100 CE), attested that *Nergal* took on some attributes of *Enlil*:

Anu and Adad watched over [the upper regions],

⁵² W. G. Lambert, ‘Meslamtaea’, in *Reallexicon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie, Siebter Band* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987-90), [hereafter Lambert, ‘Meslamtaea’], p. 143.

⁵³ Lambert, ‘Meslamtaea’, pp. 143-4.

⁵⁴ Erica Reiner and David Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens Part Three*, Cuneiform Monographs 11 (Groningen: Styx, 1998), p. 195.

⁵⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that once ...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 101.

⁵⁶ Alberto R.W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 78-9.

⁵⁷ Thorkild Jacobsen, ed. by William L. Moran, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 139.

⁵⁸ Samuel Noah Kramer, ‘BM 100042: A Hymn to Šu-Sin and an Adab to Nergal’, in *DUMU-E2-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia: Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund vol. 11, 1989), pp. 308-9.

⁵⁹ Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963 [1946]), p. 155.

⁶⁰ W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood, with the Sumerian Flood Story by Civil, M.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970 [1969]), p. 39.

Sin and Nergal guarded the earth [in the middle], [...].⁶¹

The Old-Babylonian myth of Athra-hasis showed *Enlil* in charge of the Earth whereas the Late Babylonian version substituted *Sin* and *Nergal* for *Enlil*. Tablet BM 100042 described *Nergal* as the South wind, as the storm both great and fierce, and as the son born of *Enlil* who fought for his father and who brought distress upon the disobedient.⁶² Jacobsen argues that the storm was culturally identified with the god *Enlil*, and rendered the name *Enlil* as ‘Lord Wind’.⁶³ Tablet BM 100042 attests that *Nergal* could be described not only as son but also as avenger of *Enlil*, and as such, *Nergal* might be assuming some of the epithets previously attributed to the Sumerian god *Ninurta*. By being a son of *Enlil*, *Nergal* was considered a storm, a warrior who can bring utter destruction. Therefore, *Nergal* began to assume the role of malefic deity. In the future, such role would most likely be conveyed to Mars, who would become a malefic planet.

Nergal was neither the only son of *Enlil* nor the only warrior god. *Ninurta*, the warrior/hero of the ancient Sumerian pantheon, was also son of *Enlil*.⁶⁴ The mentioned sharing of epithets between *Nergal* and *Ninurta* has been noticed already by some scholars. Henri Frankfort surmises that both *Nergal* and *Ninurta* were originally aspects of a many-sided Sumerian deity who was first a personification of the generative force of nature, and argues that they became gods of death and war as the outcome of a specialization of functions that took place after Early Dynastic times (c. 2900-2350 BCE). To Frankfort, in later times they possessed solar characteristics and in the later pantheon they were warriors with solar qualities but which still belonged at the same time to the category of the ‘dying god’.⁶⁵ According to A. Livingstone, in the Old-Babylonian period (1950-1500 BCE) *Nergal* took on

⁶¹ Foster, *Before the Muses 2nd edition*, p. 198.

⁶² Kramer, ‘BM 100042: A Hymn to Šu-Sin and an Adab to Nergal’, pp. 308-9.

⁶³ Thorkild Jacobsen, ‘The *lil*₂ of ^dEn-*lil*₂’, in *DUMU-E₂-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia: Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund vol. 11, 1989), p. 270.

⁶⁴ Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.49.

⁶⁵ Henri Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London: The Gregg Press, 1965 [1939]), [hereafter Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*], pp. 95-6.

the epithet of ‘avenger of his father Enlil’ and shared such epithet with the hero *Ninurta* who, along with *Zababa*, could be identified with *Nergal*.⁶⁶

Frankfort assumed that *Nergal* was a Sumerian god; on the other hand, current scholars such as Leick, Wiggermann, and Katz consider *Nergal* an Akkadian god. If *Nergal* was Akkadian, when *Ninurta* was active in the city of Nippur, and in Sumer in general, *Nergal* was not present in Sumer yet. *Ninurta* was associated with a city, and when that city decayed the god not only lost favor but sometimes was replaced by the god of a new city or capital favoured by the new ruler. Charles Penglase argues that the myths of *Ninurta* were assumed to a certain extent by other gods who became important later such as *Nergal*, *Nabu*, and *Marduk* (the god of the city of Babylon). According to Penglase, *Nergal* was closely associated with *Ninurta* and took over some mythological exploits and martial aspects of *Ninurta*.⁶⁷ Therefore, *Nergal* seemed to take on from *Ninurta* (Saturn) the aspects of warrior and hero.

***Nergal* and the control of trade routes**

During the Isin-Larsa period (1950-1763 BCE), the city of Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) in the Diyala Valley (across the Tigris and east of Babylon) became a hegemonic power over the surrounding cities.⁶⁸ Eshnunna was located close to the main communication route along the Tigris as well as the route that linked Mesopotamia with the Iranian plateau across the Zagros. During the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BCE, Eshnunna played a major role in the relations between Assyria and Babylonia, contends McGuire Gibson, arguing that whoever controlled Eshnunna could force the payment of tolls to use the route, or to forbid its use.⁶⁹ Gibson argues about two major parallel northwest-to-southeast trade routes, one along the Tigris and another one along the Euphrates, both routes competing and tapping the same resources and markets.⁷⁰ During the Isin-Larsa period, Eshnunna might have

⁶⁶ A. Livingstone, ‘Nergal’, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. by Karel van Der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 622.

⁶⁷ Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia*, p. 50.

⁶⁸ Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2014), chapter 11.

⁶⁹ McGuire Gibson, ‘Duplicate Systems of Trade: A Key Element in Mesopotamian History’, in *Asian Trade Routes: Continental and Maritime* (London: Curzon, 1991), [hereafter Gibson, ‘Duplicate Systems of Trade’], p. 30.

⁷⁰ Gibson, ‘Duplicate Systems of Trade’, p. 27.

controlled the Tigris route, which borders Iran, and the city-state of Mari, a trade center on the Euphrates river in Syria, might have been focused on the Euphrates route.

The Isin-Larsa period falls into the Middle Bronze Age (2100 – 1550 BCE). Bronze was produced mainly by adding tin to copper. The proportion of tin added to copper to make bronze varied between 6 to 10 percent of tin in the final alloy. Benno Landsberger argues that tin (*anaku* in Akkadian) was the main article for trade in the Old Assyrian merchant colonies in Anatolia at the beginning of the second millennium, overshadowing the trade of other current good such as silver, copper, and garments.⁷¹ Since both tin and copper had to be imported to Mesopotamia, it looks like Eshnunna played an important role in the route of tin from Elam (Iran) to Assyria and then into Anatolia (Turkey).

At least during the Isin-Larsa period, it seems that silver was used as money. Paul Garelli contends that one shekel of silver could buy in Iran between 13 to 14 shekels of tin, while the same tin could be sold in Anatolia at an average between 6 to 8 shekels of tin per shekel of silver.⁷² According to cuneiform tablets analyzed by Garelli, the profits of buying tin in Iran and selling it in Turkey were substantial. Hence, trade routes needed to be defended and protected from other city-states coveting that profit. A late nineteenth century BCE composition known as ‘Naram-Sin, king of Eshnunna’⁷³ declared *Erra* as protector of a king of Eshnunna who, showing gratitude for his victories, promised to build *Erra* a temple.⁷⁴ Hence, the mentioned nineteenth century BCE composition might attest the presence of *Nergal* in Eshnunna during the Isin-Larsa period. Besides, the presence of the Akkadian warrior-god *Nergal* to protect trade-routes makes perfect sense.

According to Jacobsen, Akkadian kings Sargon and Naram-sin created a new Akkadian empire using a large army not only for conquest but for garrisoning a network of army posts along the major routes of the empire.⁷⁵ Hildegard Lewy

⁷¹ Benno Landsberger, ‘Tin and Lead: The Adventures of Two Vocables’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Erich F. Schmidt Memorial Issue. Part One (Jul., 1965), p. 288.

⁷² Paul Garelli, *Les Assyriens en Cappadoce* (Paris: Librairie Adrien Maisonneuve, 1963), pp. 279-81.

⁷³ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, p. 124.

⁷⁴ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, pp. 124-5.

⁷⁵ Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, p. 139.

argues that the Assyrians throughout their history cherished the idea of the creation of a universal empire.⁷⁶ Louis L. Orlin argues that the situation in Anatolia (Turkey) does not show that the Assyrian gods took an important position in the consciousness of the non-Assyrian inhabitants. Orlin presumes that the individual gods of the Anatolian pantheon were actively worshiped, and that there is in no way the appearance of an imposition of the Assyrian deities upon the religious life of the Anatolian.⁷⁷ According to Mary B. Bachvaroba, however, a tablet from the Old Assyrian merchant colony of *Kanesh* (Anatolia) showed transmission of the deeds of Sargon to Anatolia already in the Old Assyrian period (2000-1750 BCE). Thus, *Nergal* might have been known in Anatolia as far back as the Old Assyrian period.

During the reign of the Amorite king Sin-iddinam (1849-1843 BCE), *Nergal* appeared among the five main deities of Larsa.⁷⁸ According to Albrecht Goetze, the gods most mentioned in cuneiform tablets from Larsa were *Šamaš* (the Sun), *Adad*, *Inanna*, *Nanaya*, and *Nergal*.⁷⁹ At the northernmost point where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers converge close enough to permit navigation, archeologists found the city of Mashkan-shapir. Elizabeth C. Stone and Paul Zimansky argue that Mashkan-shapir not only hosted a shrine to *Nergal*, which was one of the major temples of the land, but also a wall built by Larsa's king Sin-iddinam, which indicated that the city played an important role for Larsa in trade and military maneuvering.⁸⁰ Numerous barrel cylinders found at the wall contained an inscription attesting that the project was 'undertaken at the command of the god *Nergal* to increase the dwellings of Mashkan-shapir'.⁸¹ Thus, during the Isin-Larsa period the presence of *Nergal* began to be attested in Sumerian cities of the south, such as Larsa, and in the control of the trade by those cities.

⁷⁶ Hildergard Lewy, *The Cambridge Ancient History, volume I part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 735-6.

⁷⁷ Louis L. Orlin L, *Assyrian Colonies in Cappadocia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p.169.

⁷⁸ Joan Goodnick Westenholz, 'Nanaya: lady of mystery', in *Sumerian Gods and their Representations, Cuneiform Monographs 7* (Groningen: Styx, 1997), p. 69.

⁷⁹ Albrecht Goetze, 'Sin-Iddinam of Larsa. New Tablets from His Reign', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1950), p. 90.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth C. Stone and Paul Zimansky, 'Mashkan-Shapir and the Anatomy of an Old Babylonian City', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Dec., 1992), [hereafter Stone and Zimanski, 'Mashkan-Shapir'], pp. 212-3.

⁸¹ Stone and Zimansky, 'Mashkan-Shapir', p. 213.

According to Frankfort, during the Isin-Larsa period Eshnunna was a prosperous small-independent state; the bricks of a house of the Larsa period in Eshnunna contained inscriptions in Akkadian stating that Šulgi had built the temple E-sikil for a god called *Tišpak*, and inscriptions in Sumerian stating that it was built for *Ninazu*.⁸² Wiggermann contends that during the Old Akkadian period the city of Eshnunna received a migration of Akkadian speaking people, and among them the god *Tišpak* became their chief god, which was identified with the Sumerian chief god of the city: *Ninazu*.⁸³ Even though Frankfort does not mention *Nergal*, *Ninazu* was later assimilated by *Nergal*. The fact that Eshnunna would be destroyed first by Hammurabi, and later by the son of Hammurabi, may have fueled the assimilation of *Ninazu* by *Nergal*.

Hammurabi, after defeating Larsa in 1763 BCE, Eshnunna in 1761 BCE, and Mari in 1758 BCE,⁸⁴ ended up controlling the trade routes along the Tigris and the Euphrates. Hammurabi actually destroyed Eshnunna and resettled its population.⁸⁵ Samsuiluna, king of Babylon (1749-1712 BCE) and successor of Hammurabi, left inscriptions commemorating the specific year when he defeated the army of Eshnunna and executed its king.⁸⁶ According to Stone and Zimansky, unknown causes led to the abandonment of all the southern and central Babylonian cities during the reign of Samsuiluna, and thereafter no more is heard of the city of Mashkan-shapir.⁸⁷ Lambert argues that from early second millennium, *Ereshkigal* ruled the netherworld without equal, and her husband was neither *Ninazu* nor *Nergal*. Lambert surmises that the decline of *Enegi* as a town must have contributed to *Ninazu*'s loss of preeminence in the netherworld pantheon, and with the rise of Babylonian literature during the Old Babylonian period, *Nergal* was promoted to be king of the netherworld.⁸⁸ Therefore, Eshnunna might not only ceased to be of importance but decayed after being conquered by Hammurabi and Samsuiluna. That

⁸² Henry Frankfort, *Tell Asmar, Khafaje and Khorsabad*, Oriental Institute Communications, No. 16 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1933), pp. 53-7.

⁸³ Wiggermann, 'Tišpak, his seal, and the dragon mušhušsu', p. 125.

⁸⁴ Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, chapter 11.

⁸⁵ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, p. 127.

⁸⁶ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, pp. 140-1.

⁸⁷ Stone and Zimansky, 'Mashkan-Shapir', p. 214.

⁸⁸ Lambert, 'The Theology of Death', p. 62.

might explain when *Ninazu* could began to be assimilated by *Nergal*, and why *Nergal* became stronger in the Babylonian netherworld pantheon.

Besides the tablet from Kanesh (Anatolia) showing the deeds of Sargon, Bachvaroba propounds not only a second possible form of transmission via scribal schools of Mesopotamia and north Syria, but a third transmitted orally by the Hurrians, probably from north Syria.⁸⁹ In fact, in the sixteenth century BCE, after the fall of the First Babylonian Dynasty to the Hittites, which ruled from Hattusha on the central Anatolian plateau, Mesopotamia was ruled in the south by the Kassites and in the north (Assyria) by the Hurrians from their kingdom of Mittani, centered in the Kabur region.⁹⁰

On the transmission of gods from East to West, Sarah P. Morris proposes that

the transmission of religious beliefs and practices from East to West must have resembled the migration of metallurgy, or even the adoption of the alphabet: the process was not so much incremental but rather repeated in independent and informal encounters.⁹¹

Dalley describes *Nergal (Erra)* as patron of copper smelting,⁹² but does not mention the original source. Copper was brought in Mesopotamia from Iran, Anatolia (Turkey), Magan (Oman), and Alashiya (Cyprus).⁹³ In the eighteenth-century BCE copper from Alashiya made its first appearance in cuneiform texts.⁹⁴ Around 1400 BCE in Cyprus, which since about 1700 BCE had been in contact with Syria-Palestine, appeared large quantities of Mycenaean pottery possibly being traded for copper, a trade which increased in volume during the thirteen century BCE.⁹⁵ Hence, contacts between Mesopotamia and Cyprus started at least in the eighteenth century

⁸⁹ Mary R. Bachvarova, *From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), [hereafter Bachvarova, *Hittite to Homer*], p. 169.

⁹⁰ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, pp. 291-2.

⁹¹ Sarah P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 115.

⁹² Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 283.

⁹³ D. T. Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p. 165.

⁹⁴ Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization*, p. 168.

⁹⁵ James David Muhly, *Copper and Tin: The Distribution of Mineral Resources and the Nature of the Metals Trade in the Bronze Age* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973), p. 197.

BCE, and contacts with Syria-Palestine were also attested later. The steady imports of copper mean that one possible avenue of transmission of gods was in place.

In fact, a transmission of Nergal from Mesopotamia to Syria is attested in a Sirio-Canaanite deity known as *Resheph*. In the third millennium BCE at Ebla, *Resheph* was identified with the Mesopotamian god ^dKIŠ.UNU, known later as Nergal.⁹⁶ Edward Lipinski insists that *Resheph* was a warlike god and a protective deity identified with *Nergal* during the mid-third millennium BCE when *Nergal* was just a war-god, inflicting death in general, and not yet an underworld deity like *Ninazu* or with the properties of the chthonic gods from the circle of *Ereshkigal*.⁹⁷

Ninazu

Katz describes *Ninazu* as a warrior god on one hand, and as young-dying snake-god related to agriculture and the netherworld god, on the other.⁹⁸ To Wiggermann, *Ninazu* was an underworld deity who resembled *Ninurta* by being a warrior and a seal keeper.⁹⁹ Wiggermann translates *Ninazu* as ‘Lord healer’ and describes him as king of snakes in Old Babylonian incantations, and argues that the cities of *Ninazu* were Eshnunna and Enegi (in southern Sumer).¹⁰⁰ A hymn composed in Akkad by the daughter of Sargon, defined Enegi as the house of *Ninazu* and equated Enegi to the Kutha of Sumer.¹⁰¹ The translation seems to imply that Enegi was linked to the netherworld, hence *Ninazu* could be considered a Sumerian netherworld god.

Lambert argues that the description of Enegi as Kutha of Sumer was an element of contrast with Nergal’s Kutha, which was in Akkad, and with the rise of Akkad as a political empire, any document composed in Akkad or during an Akkadian period would make the most of *Nergal* and denigrate his Sumerian rival *Ninazu*.¹⁰² Another Hymn attested that *Ninazu* had a temple in the city of Eshnunna, and described

⁹⁶ Edward Lipinski, *Resheph: A Syro-Canaanite Deity*, *Studia Phoenicia XIX, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 181* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), [hereafter Lipinski, *Resheph*], pp. 26-7.

⁹⁷ Lipinski, *Resheph*, pp. 26-7.

⁹⁸ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 434.

⁹⁹ F. A. M. Wiggermann, ‘Tišpak, his seal, and the dragon mušhušsu’, in *To the Euphrates and Beyond: Archaeological studies in honour of Maurits N.van Loon* (Rotterdam: Brookfield, 1989), p. 125.

¹⁰⁰ F. A. M. Wiggermann ‘Transtigridian snake gods’, *Sumerian Gods and their Representation: Cuneiform Monographs 7* (Groningen: Styx, 1997), p. 35.

¹⁰¹ Åke W. Sjöberg, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns: Texts from Cuneiform Sources vol. III* (Locust Valley: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1969), pp. 27-8.

¹⁰² Lambert, ‘The Theology of Death’, pp. 61-2.

Ninazu as son of Enlil, as a warrior, and as a lion who poured venom over any hostile land. The hymn compared *Ninazu* to a south storm, a raging storm, and a dragon raging against the rebel land.¹⁰³ Besides the fact that being compared to Enlil reinforced the role of *Ninazu* as a warrior, being compared to a dragon might cast upon *Ninazu* the role of god related to the underworld.

According to Lambert, Van Dijk constructs two gods *Ninazu*: one *Ninurta*-type god at home in the city of Eshnunna with parents Enlil and Ninlil, and one underworld god at home in the city of Enegi with several different fathers and *Ereshkigal* as mother; Lambert also considers that there were two gods named *Ninazu*, one of the city of Enegi and another one of the city of Eshnunna, and presumes that only the *Ninazu* of Enegi had underworld connections.¹⁰⁴ Wiggermann, however, contends that both gods *Ninazu* have the same wife, *Ningirida*, the same brother, *Ninmada*, and both are associated with the dragon *mušhušsu*. Therefore, to Wiggermann there is only one god *Ninazu*, and the connection with the underworld was the association of *Ninazu* with the dragon *mušhušsu*.¹⁰⁵ Katz argues that the image of *Ninazu* in Šulgi's court is illustrated by two hymns, known as Šulgi D and Šulgi X, which characterize *Ninazu* as a war-god, and the only link with the Netherworld is the epithet *muš-huš* which is mentioned in Šulgi D 308.¹⁰⁶

Attested in writing for the first time in a Sumerian wisdom composition from the area of Lagash (south of Sumer) dating about the twenty-fourth century BCE,¹⁰⁷ the Akkadian term *mušhušsu* (a loan-word from Sumerian), literally a 'fearsome serpent', was a snake-dragon which denoted a supernatural being companion of certain gods and their ally against evil; it was also an apotropaic figure whose iconography showed a composite being with the front paws of a lion and hind paws like the talons of a bird of prey; his earliest forms had a lion's head, and in the pre-Akkadian period a snake's head.¹⁰⁸ Theodor J. Lewis writes about two

¹⁰³ Sjöberg, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns*, pp. 42-3.

¹⁰⁴ Lambert, 'The Theology of Death', p. 61.

¹⁰⁵ F. A. M. Wiggermann. 'Tišpak, his seal, and the dragon *mušhušsu*', in *To the Euphrates and Beyond: Archaeological studies in honour of Maurits N. van Loon* (Rotterdam: Brookfield, 1989), p. 122.

¹⁰⁶ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 435.

¹⁰⁷ R. D. Biggs, 'Pre-Sargonic Riddles from Lagash', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32 (January-October 1973), pp. 26, 30.

¹⁰⁸ F. A. M. Wiggermann, 'mušhuššu', in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie: Achter Band* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993-1997), pp. 455-62.

representations from Eshnunna in which the god *Tišpak* is shown riding upon the *mušhušsu*, which Lewis translates as ‘dragon’ and as ‘terrifying serpent’.¹⁰⁹ Katz argues that in the texts of the third dynasty of Ur *Ninazu* is not included in their lists of netherworld gods.¹¹⁰ It is as if *Ninazu* was being pushed out of the netherworld. Wiggermann argues that from Old Akkadian times onward, *Ninazu* as chief god of Eshnunna was succeeded by *Tišpak*, a god of foreign origin whose original character is still unknown, who apparently inherited from *Ninazu* the dragon *mušhušsu*.¹¹¹ Jacobsen concluded, based on those two inscriptions, that during the old Akkadian period the god *Tišpak* took the place of the Sumerian god *Ninazu*. Katz, however, finds this conclusion debatable, arguing that *Ninazu* was still worshipped in Southern Sumer and appeared as a god of war in the so-called Šulgi hymns D and X. To Katz, during Šulgi’s time both *Ninazu* and *Tišpak* were worshipped in Eshnunna, side by side.¹¹²

A remarkable fact was that *Ninazu* had a dragon, and it seems that *Tišpak* inherited that dragon. Wiggermann argues that *Tišpak* did not take the dragon with him from his original home by the fact that in Lagash (Gudea) *mušhušsu* is associated with *Ninazu*’s son *Ningizzida*.¹¹³ In either case, when *Nergal* assimilated *Ninazu*, *Nergal* most likely inherited a dragon, or a serpent.

Nergal as an underworld deity

In the myth known as ‘The Serpent’, *Nergal* was most likely referred to as ‘The Vanguard, tamer of serpents’.¹¹⁴ The extant text described *Nergal* as a hero in the vanguard, in an upfront position. On the other hand, his ability to tame serpents preliminarily connects *Nergal* to the netherworld: the term serpent may indicate not only a wild animal, but also a dragon, which can very likely be an underworld creature. It is also significant that *Nergal* was associated with serpents.

¹⁰⁹ Theodore J. Lewis, ‘CT 13.33-34 and Ezekiel 32: Lion-Dragon Myths’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1996), p. 29.

¹¹⁰ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 434.

¹¹¹ F. A. M. Wiggermann, ‘*Tišpak*, his seal, and the dragon *mušhušsu*’, *To the Euphrates and Beyond: Archaeological studies in honour of Maurits N. van Loon* (Rotterdam: Brookfield, 1989), p. 120.

¹¹² Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian sources*, p. 348.

¹¹³ Wiggermann ‘*Tišpak*, his seal, and the dragon *mušhušsu*’, p. 121.

¹¹⁴ Foster, *Before the Muses 2nd edition*, p. 483.

The myth known as ‘Enlil and Ninlil’ introduced Meslamtaea (Nergal) as the second son of Enlil and Ninlil. After the birth of their first son, Sin (Moon), Enlil, forced down to the Netherworld, changed his identity three times to copulate with Ninlil.¹¹⁵ As a result, three gods of the netherworld were conceived: *Meslamtaea*, *Ninazu*, and *Enbilulu*.¹¹⁶ *Enbilulu* in Sumer was considered an agricultural deity, whereas in Babylon he was a son of Ea (Enki).¹¹⁷

Tablet BM 100042 described *Nergal* as the lord of the place where the sun rises, as one who turns the enemies into ghosts, as lord of the Netherworld.¹¹⁸ The Sumerian word for the netherworld, *kur*, also meant ‘mountain’ and ‘foreign land’.¹¹⁹ Katz assumes that the Sumerians originally conceived the netherworld as a mountain located in the outside borders of Sumer.¹²⁰ In hymn thirty-six of *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns*, *Nergal* was called *Girra* (*Erra*, written ^dgir.ra), lord of the Sunset, and *Meslamtaea*; in the same document Kutha was defined as the house of *Nergal*.¹²¹ According to tablet IX of the Standard Babylonian version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh found two scorpion-beings guarding the entrance of the netherworld.¹²² F. A. M. Wiggerman writes that a scorpion man and a scorpion woman guarded the gate of mountain *Māšu* (in Akkadian *Māšu* means ‘twin’) which was the entrance of the Netherworld, and watch over the rising and the setting of the Sun.¹²³ In another context, the gods *Lugal-irra* and *Meslamtaea* were thought to stand at the entrance to the Netherworld ready to dismember the dead as they entered. Astronomical texts also explain the constellation of Gemini as *Lugal-irra* and *Meslamtaea*.¹²⁴ According to Roberts, the god *Erra* associated with *Nergal* was

¹¹⁵ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, p. 47.

¹¹⁶ Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972 [1944]), [hereafter Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*], p. 43.

¹¹⁷ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, p. 39.

¹¹⁸ Kramer, ‘BM 100042: A Hymn to Šu-Sin and an Adab to Nergal’, pp. 308-9.

¹¹⁹ Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, p. 76.

¹²⁰ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, pp. 63-7.

¹²¹ Sjöberg, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns*, p. 44.

¹²² M. A. Ataç, ‘The Melammu as Divine Epiphany and Usurped Entity’, in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. by Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 299.

¹²³ F. A. M. Wiggerman, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1992), p. 180.

¹²⁴ Mehmet-Ali Ataç ‘The "Underworld Vision" of the Ninevite Intellectual Milieu’, Iraq, Vol. 66, *Nineveh. Papers of the 49th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Part One (2004), p. 72.

sometimes spelled “*Irra*”.¹²⁵ Thus, the entrance of the Netherworld was guarded by deities closely related to Nergal. In addition, *Nergal* not only added the features of the warrior god *Erra*, but by the Old Babylonian period, *Nergal* assimilated several rival Sumerian chthonic gods such as *Ninazu*, and *Meslamtaea*.¹²⁶

The myth known as ‘Nergal and Ereshkigal’, the earlier version dating from fourteenth century BCE,¹²⁷ described how *Nergal* ended up marrying *Ereshkigal*. According to Foster, ‘Nergal and Ereshkigal’ related how *Nergal* became king of the netherworld.¹²⁸ Katz argues that in the earlier periods *Nergal* appeared mainly as a warrior-god whereas in the later periods *Nergal* appeared also as netherworld god.¹²⁹

Nergal as a netherworld deity is attested in the Neo-Assyrian literature poem known as *the Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince*, a prince (who might be Ashurbanipal) comes face to face with the netherworld god *Nergal*, and sees the god as a luminescent being.¹³⁰

Erra and the Sebetti

Dating no earlier than the eighth century BCE, ‘Erra and Ishum’ is a composition consisting of some 750 lines spread over five tablets,¹³¹ and centered on the destructive nature of the god *Erra* (*Nergal*). In ‘Erra and Ishum’, *Erra* was described as ‘the wild bull of heaven’¹³², and as ‘the lion on earth’.¹³³ Both descriptions coincide with the general depiction of *Nergal* as a bull and as a lion. ‘Erra and Ishum’ introduced the *Sebetti* (literally ‘the Seven’) as a gift of *Anu* to *Erra*, and later described the *Sebetti* as invincible¹³⁴, flaming¹³⁵, with the face of the lion,¹³⁶ bearing

¹²⁵ J. J. M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon: A Study of the Semitic Deities Attested in Mesopotamia before Ur III* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 22.

¹²⁶ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, pp. 127-8.

¹²⁷ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 163.

¹²⁸ Foster, *Before the Muses 2nd edition*, p. 410.

¹²⁹ Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*, pp. 353-4.

¹³⁰ Ataç, Mehmet-Ali, ‘The Melammu as Divine Epiphany and Usurped Entity’, *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Studies*, ed. by Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 299-300.

¹³¹ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 282.

¹³² Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, p. 885.

¹³³ Foster, *Before the Muses 3rd edition*, p. 885.

¹³⁴ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹³⁵ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹³⁶ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

fierce weapons,¹³⁷ a blowing wind¹³⁸, merciless and destructive¹³⁹, and filled with the venom of the dragon¹⁴⁰. According to Cooley, in ‘Erra and Ishum’ the god *An* charged the *Sebetti* to assist *Erra* in destructive acts such as the annihilation of humans and their domestic livestock; and notes that *Sebetti* were well attested in astronomical texts, and in the Neo-Assyrian period associated with the Pleiades.¹⁴¹ Thus, *Erra* (*Nergal*) was not only associated with destruction of humans and animals, but also the attributes of the *Sebetti* reinforced *Erra* (*Nergal*) as a warrior deity of death and destruction. ‘Erra and Ishum’ posited *Nergal* not only as a warrior, but as bringer of destruction and as a substitute for *Marduk*. Therefore, the myth contradicts Katz’s position that *Nergal* ended up being just a netherworld god.

To Brown, in ‘Erra and Ishum’ the absence of *Marduk* and the temporary take-over by *Erra* is a parallel of two heavenly-ill events: the absence of Jupiter behind the sun and the brilliance of *Erra*.¹⁴² The absence of Jupiter behind the Sun may mean an astrological conjunction of the Sun with Jupiter which renders the latter invisible. In fact, Brown argues that *Marduk*’s decision to descend to the *apsû* and have his garments cleaned, may in part be describing Jupiter’s conjunction with the Sun.¹⁴³ It may well be, as Cooley argues, a conjunction, but it can also be a period of non-visibility of Jupiter because *Marduk* is descending to the *apsû*, which was a place located underground and supposedly full of water, to clean his garments, most likely with those underground waters. Therefore, the disappearance of Jupiter could be due either to a conjunction with the Sun, or by a period of non-visibility of Jupiter in the northern hemisphere by being under the earth. The point of the myth could be that if *Erra* took command, destruction and war would ensue.

The astrological meaning of *Nergal*

Strength was attributed to *Nergal* at least during the Middle Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian periods. In the myth known as ‘The Serpent’, the mother goddess *Aruru*

¹³⁷ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹³⁸ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹³⁹ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹⁴⁰ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 286.

¹⁴¹ Cooley, ‘I Want to Dim the Brilliance of Šulpae!’, p. 180.

¹⁴² Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology*, p. 256.

¹⁴³ Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology*, p. 256.

confessed ‘I granted strength to Nergal. To Nergal did I give the fullest’.¹⁴⁴ Simo Parpola argues that strength occurred in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions as a common epithet of *Nergal*.¹⁴⁵ Besides strength, another common attribute of *Nergal* was danger. Leick comments that numerous prayers and hymns were addressed to *Nergal* in order to avert his dangerous influence.¹⁴⁶ *Ploutos* was the Greek god of riches son of Demeter, goddess linked to the underworld by her other daughter, Persephone, who was abducted by Hades to the Netherworld. Parpola introduces a connection between *Nergal* and *Ploutos* based on a few names of *Nergal* related to riches, such as ‘king of opulence’ (*Lugal-hegal*), ‘day of opulence’ (*Ud-hegal*), and the personal name *Šubši-mešre-Šakkan* (‘Bring-Riches-Šakkan’).¹⁴⁷

Koch-Westenholz argues that in Mesopotamia the planet Mars was sometimes referred to as red, while in others was considered not only bringer of evil but with a sinister character, whereas in an astrological context, Mars was called the planet *Salbatānu*, a name which was explained as ‘constantly portending pestilence’ or as ‘the incalculable star’.¹⁴⁸ Koch-Westenholz translates some of the names of *Nergal* from ‘The Great Star List’ as enemy, liar, evil, different, and strange; and writes that Mars was considered in that list as one of the twelve stars of *Amurru*.¹⁴⁹

Reynolds claims that the unpropitious role of Mars comes mainly from the following section on epithets of Nergal from the ‘Great Star List’:

fiery red, red, yellow, sinister, strange, hostile, liar, evil, fox, star of Elam, robber, wolf, eagle, evil, Simut, incalculable, plough, yoke, star of dignity, raven, kidney, star of Eridu, and panther.¹⁵⁰

In addition to that, Reynolds lists another set of seven names of Nergal (Mars) from the ‘Great Star List’:

¹⁴⁴ Foster, *Before the Muses 2nd edition*, p. 482.

¹⁴⁵ Simo Parpola, ‘The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1993), p. 180.

¹⁴⁶ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁷ Parpola, ‘The Assyrian Tree of Life’, p. 180.

¹⁴⁸ Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1995), p. 128.

¹⁴⁹ Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology*, p. 128.

¹⁵⁰ Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology*, p. 191.

The Sinister, The Strange, The Hostile,
The Liar, The Evil, The Fox, The Star of Elam.
Mars, its seven names.¹⁵¹

Those seven names, however, are all found within the section of the ‘Great Star List’ containing the epithets of Nergal.

Most of the epithets of Mars (Nergal) listed in the ‘Great Star List’ are attested in extant reports of Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers. A report by diviner *Nergal-Etir* attested that ‘The red planet is Mars’.¹⁵² Diviner *Rašil*, in a report on March 15th 668 BCE, wrote that ‘The Yoke star means Mars’.¹⁵³ Diviner *Nabû-ahhe-eriba* wrote twice that the Wolf star is Mars: the first time on a report on March 26th 670 BCE,¹⁵⁴ the second time on a report on January 23rd 668 BCE.¹⁵⁵ Diviner *Nergal-etir* wrote in a report that ‘The panther is Nergal’.¹⁵⁶ Gavin White surmises that the Panther’s attributes of destruction and death were emphasized by associating the Panther with *Nergal*.¹⁵⁷ Thus, astrological reports of the Neo-Babylonian period treated *Nergal* as god of death and destruction by associating *Nergal* with constellations such as the Panther. In a composition known as ‘The rites of *Egašankamma*’, line 37 reads ‘The fox which comes out howling, is Nergal’.¹⁵⁸ The fox-star was associated with tricks; in fact, a Mesopotamian proverb showed that the fox was regarded as a smart animal:

The man who seized the tail of a lion sank in the river. He who seized the tail
of a fox escaped.¹⁵⁹

Mars as the False star, the red planet, and the strange star is attested in report by *Nabû-iqiša* of Borsippa on June 11th 678 BCE:

¹⁵¹ Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology*, pp. 199-201.

¹⁵² Hermann Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings, State Archives of Assyria vol. VIII* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992), [hereafter Hunger, *SAA 8*], 274 r. 6, p. 273.

¹⁵³ Hunger, *SAA 8*, 383: r-4, p. 219.

¹⁵⁴ Hunger, *SAA 8*, 45:4, p. 27.

¹⁵⁵ Hunger, *SAA 8*, 48:5, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ Hunger, *SAA 8*, 284:2, p. 156.

¹⁵⁷ Gavin White, *Babylonian Star-Lore: An Illustrated Guide to the Star-Lore and Constellations of Ancient Babylonia* (London: Solaria Publications, 2014), p. 211.

¹⁵⁸ Alasdair Livingston, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea: State Archives of Assyria vol. 3* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), [hereafter Livingstone, *SAA 3*], p. 97.

¹⁵⁹ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 281.

If Jupiter and the False star meet: a god will devour [...]

If the red planet and the big star come close: fall of cattle. The red planet is Mars, the big star is Jupiter.

[...]

If a strange star comes close to Jupiter: in this year, the king of Akkad will die but the harvest of the land will prosper.¹⁶⁰

In the same report, *Nabû-iqiša* of Borsippa portended that such conjunction (Jupiter and the False star meet) was bad for all lands.¹⁶¹

Reporting on June 25th 669 BCE, diviner *Bullutu* associated Mars with the god *Nergal*,¹⁶² stated that Mars portended death,¹⁶³ and discussed the effect of the brilliance Mars stating that the more brilliant Mars was, the more malefic it became. *Bullutu* wrote:

‘If Mars becomes faint, it is good; if it becomes bright, misfortune’.¹⁶⁴

Bullutu forecasted a good year if Mars was near Jupiter (*Šulpa’e*). The line of the report reads:

If Mars goes behind Šulpa’e: this year is good.¹⁶⁵

Therefore, *Bullutu* considered Jupiter benefic to such an extent that the evil attributes of Mars were absent when both planets were in conjunction. The same report seemed to associate Mars with the *Anzu* star:

If a planet comes near the Anzu star: horses will die.¹⁶⁶

Anzu was a lion-headed eagle, defeated by *Ninurta* (Saturn).¹⁶⁷ *Bullutu* also discussed, in the same report, other attributes of Mars:

¹⁶⁰ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 288:3, r. 1, 5, p. 160.

¹⁶¹ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 288:1, r. 7, p. 160.

¹⁶² Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114:8, p. 72.

¹⁶³ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114:3, p. 72.

¹⁶⁴ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114: r. 3, p. 73.

¹⁶⁵ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114: r. 4, p. 73.

¹⁶⁶ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114: r. 1, p. 73.

¹⁶⁷ Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, pp. 9-10.

If Mars becomes visible in Tammuz (month IV) the cemetery of the warriors will enlarge.

[...]

If Mars stands in the east: attack of Subartu and the Kassites against the land.

If Mars rises scintillating and its radiance is yellow: the king of Elam will die.

If Nergal in his appearance is very small and white, and scintillates very much like the fixed stars: he will have mercy on Akkad; the force of my troops will go and defeat the enemy troops, it will conquer the land for which it strives; the enemy troops will not be able to stand in the face of my troops; the cattle of Akkad will lie in the steppe undisturbed; sesame and dates will prosper.¹⁶⁸

In the report, the east of Sumer (Iraq) seemed associated with Elam (in Iran), and Mars standing in the east implied war, attack coming from Subartu and the Kassites, and the brilliance and the color of Mars also had meaning: yellow was bad for the enemy, white was good for Akkad. On the meaning of the brilliance of Mars, Cooley argues that in astronomical texts a bright Mars is regarded with anxiety, and then speculates that outcome could be ambiguous.¹⁶⁹ The ambiguity mentioned by Cooley is attested a report by *Nergal-etir* in which *Nergal* means abundance on one hand, and plague on the other:

Mars carried radiance. The red planet (means) plenty for the people; the red planet (means): plagues will be raging.¹⁷⁰

On a report, diviner *Bullutu* wrote ‘if Mars becomes faint, it is good; if it becomes bright, misfortune’¹⁷¹, Cooley argues that a bright Mars was normally considered a bad thing.¹⁷² Cooley, however, concludes that most often ‘a bright Mars foretold doom, as one would expect for a planet associated with Erra/Nergal’.¹⁷³

Cooley argues that Mars was malevolent and was associated with countries that were malevolent to the diviner and therefore to his king.¹⁷⁴ Cooley argues that even though Mars was mundanely associated with Elam, in an astrological report by *Rašil* Mars

¹⁶⁸ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 114:1-8, pp. 72-3.

¹⁶⁹ Cooley, ‘I Want to Dim the Brilliance of Šulpae!’, p. 185.

¹⁷⁰ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 274 r.3-5, p. 273.

¹⁷¹ Hunger, *SAA* 8, p. 115.

¹⁷² Cooley, ‘Propaganda, Prognostication, and Planets’, p. 20.

¹⁷³ Cooley, ‘I Want to Dim the Brilliance of Šulpae!’, p. 185.

¹⁷⁴ Cooley, ‘Propaganda, Prognostication, and Planets’, p. 20.

was considered ‘the star of Amurru’¹⁷⁵; then Cooley concludes that *Rašil* understood Mars as referring to either of the traditional eastern or western foreign enemies of the land.¹⁷⁶ In general, it seems that *Nergal*, as the Enemy star, was associated with the enemy, no matter where it was located.

Reporting on Mars and Pegasus in the halo of the moon, *Rašil* wrote that Mars was a star of the Westland; the Field Star (Pegasus) behind which were the Pleiades, was Aries; and Aries was a star of the Westland.¹⁷⁷

In a report dated June 20th 666 BCE about Mars in Scorpio but about to move out of the sign, *Rašil* wrote:

Mars, [...] until the 25th of Tammuz (month IV) it will move out of Scorpius; and its radiance is fallen. Let the king my lord be happy; [...] but until Mars goes out, let the king guard himself.¹⁷⁸

Rašil confirmed that the king should not worry because the radiance of Mars was dimmed. Therefore, it was the radiance of Mars which was taken into account when making predictions, and according to those reports, the more radiant the more dangerous Mars became. One more consideration from the report is the meaning of the sign of Scorpio; *Rašil* warned the king to take precautions until Mars was out Scorpio. Hence, *Rašil* implied that Scorpio was a dangerous sign for the king. Later, in Hellenistic astrology, Ptolemy stated clearly that Scorpio was ruled by Mars.¹⁷⁹

In a report from May 20th 672 BCE on Mars standing in the halo of the moon, diviner *Nabû-ahhe-eriba* predicted:

Loss of cattle; the Westland will become smaller.
That is bad for the Westland.¹⁸⁰

Diviner *Nabû-šuma-iškun*, reporting on Mars standing in the halo of the moon, predicted:

¹⁷⁵ Cooley, ‘Propaganda, Prognostication, and Planets’, p. 20.

¹⁷⁶ Cooley, ‘Propaganda, Prognostication, and Planets’, p. 20.

¹⁷⁷ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 412: r. 2-4, pp. 233-4.

¹⁷⁸ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 387:3, p. 222.

¹⁷⁹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book I 17, p. 81.

¹⁸⁰ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 41:5,8, p. 25.

fall of cattle and of animals of the steppe; the cultivated field will not prosper,
... will diminish.¹⁸¹

The interpretation of the effect of Mars standing next to the halo of the moon is not beneficial for the cattle and diminishes the yield of the crop. In the same report, *Nabû-šuma-iškun* wrote that the Pleiades (MUL.MUL) were equivalent to Mars.¹⁸² The *Sebetti* (seven stars) were also associated to the Pleiades, and the Sebetti in the myth know as ‘Erra and Ishum’ were associated to *Erra (Nergal)*.

Reporting on March 15th 668 BCE, *Šapiku* of Borsippa wrote

Mars, the star of Subartu, is bright and carries radiance: this is good for Subartu. And Saturn, the star of the Westland, is faint, and its radiance is fallen; this is bad for the Westland; an attack of an enemy will occur against the Westland.¹⁸³

From that report, it can be argued that the planets were associated to countries, and the brilliance of a planet indicated the fate of the country to which it was associated. Mars was associated to Subartu, and Saturn to the Westland. Hence, a bright Mars indicated that the land associated to Mars would be fine, and Saturn dimmed indicated that the land associated to Saturn would suffer.

In a report on March 15th 668 BCE, *Rašil* predicted:

loss of cattle; in all lands cultivated fields and dates will not prosper; the Westland will diminish.

If the moon is surrounded by a halo, and the Yoke star stands in it: the king will die, and his land will diminish; the king of Elam will die.

[...].

Mars is the star of the Westland, evil for the Westland and Elam. Saturn is the star of Akkad. It is good for the king my lord.¹⁸⁴

The previous report attested that Mars, the Yoke star, was associated with Elam and the Westland, which was the enemy. The report associated Saturn with the king of

¹⁸¹ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 376:1, p. 213.

¹⁸² Hunger, *SAA* 8, 376:9, p. 213.

¹⁸³ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 491:7, p. 271.

¹⁸⁴ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 383:7, r. 1, 5-7, pp. 219-20.

Akkad. *Rašil*, reporting on Mars approaching the Old Man star (Perseus), predicted a revolution in the Westland in which brother will kill brother and

the emblems of the land will be overthrown; a secret of the land will go to another land; the gods will leave it and will turn away from it.¹⁸⁵

Ares and Nergal

Walter Burkert discusses that Ares may be an ancient noun meaning war or throng of battle,¹⁸⁶ and argues that Homer, who used the term *ares* for battle, considered Ares a god insatiable in battle, destructive, and man-slaughtering.¹⁸⁷ According to Homer, Ares was furious and ‘bane of mortals’¹⁸⁸ and was considered by Zeus as the most hateful of all the gods of Olympus because strife was ‘dear to thee and wars and fightings’.¹⁸⁹ J. N. Bremmer argues that Ares was a fierce and destructive warrior who did not represent matters of defense but the brutal aspects of war.¹⁹⁰ Thus, Ares, deemed to be a destructive god of war ruinous to men, resembled the Mesopotamian version of *Nergal* as *Erra*, a god of destruction and death.

Burkert argues that *the Iliad* associated Mars with the Trojans, the losing side.¹⁹¹ Similarly, in the myth of the fight for the city of Pylus, Athena fought for Herakles, the winning side, while the Pylians were defended by Ares, Hades, Poseidon, and Hera.¹⁹² In both cases, Ares was on the losing side, and was associated with the enemy. Thus, Nergal as a god associated with the enemy, somehow was matched by Ares, who was usually associated with the enemy.

¹⁸⁵ Hunger, *SAA* 8, 400:5, pp. 228-9.

¹⁸⁶ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), [hereafter Burkert, *Greek Religion*], p. 169.

¹⁸⁷ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 169.

¹⁸⁸ Homer, *The Iliad*, vol. I, trans. by A. T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1924]), V 30-1, p. 197.

¹⁸⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, vol. I, V 890, p. 259.

¹⁹⁰ J. N. Bremmer, ‘Ares’, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. by Karel van Der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999), [hereafter Bremmer, ‘Ares’], pp. 85-6.

¹⁹¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 169.

¹⁹² Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Combined Edition* (London: Penguin Books, 1992 [1955]), p. 544.

Similarities between Ares and *Nergal* can be found in the myth of the foundation of Thebes. According to Apollodorus, Cadmus founded the city of Thebes.¹⁹³ Cadmus, upon reaching Thebes, ended up killing a dragon guarding the fountain of Ares; supposedly, the dragon was an offspring of Ares. Following the advice of Athena, Cadmus sowed the teeth of the dragon and out of them grew the Spartans who, after a trick performed by Cadmus, ended up killing themselves except for five who survived: *Echion*, *Udaeus*, *Chthonius*, *Hyperenor*, and *Pelorus*.¹⁹⁴ According to Jordi Pàmies, the name of each surviving Spartan was self-explanatory: *Echion* was serpentine, *Chthonius* and *Udaeus* chthonic, *Hyperenor* arrogant, and *Pelorus* gigantic.¹⁹⁵ Albeit indirectly, Apollodorus revealed the nature of Ares through the offspring of the god. *Nergal* was also arrogant, strong, chthonic, and had a dragon.

There might be certain links between Cadmus, *Melqart* (the Phoenician city-god of Tyre) and *Nergal*. Pherecides claimed that Cadmus was either son of Phoenix or of Aegis.¹⁹⁶ West writes that Aegis was the father of Phoenix, and surmises that the word Phoenix must be understood as an eponym of the Phoenicians, and argues that by the fifth century BCE the myth was established that Cadmus was originally from Tyre in Phoenicia.¹⁹⁷ The foundation of Thebes showed links with Ares: Cadmus was married to Harmonia, daughter of Ares,¹⁹⁸ the myth happened nearby the fountain of Ares, and the first inhabitants of Thebes were Spartans born from the teeth of a dragon associated with Ares. Furthermore, M. L. West contends that the inhabitants of Thebes were designated after the name Cadmus, and that the etymology of the root of Cadmus seems not to be Greek but West Semitic meaning either ‘east, eastern’ or ‘ancient, antiquity’.¹⁹⁹ Thus, Cadmus meaning east or eastern could be linked with *Nergal* who, as the star of Elam (Iran) was associated with the East. Besides, the links that Thebes had with Ares might have been imported from Tyre. The striking point is that the city-god of Tyre was *Melqart* which, according to

¹⁹³ Apollodorus, *The Library: vol 1, Books 1-3.9*, trans. by James G. Frazer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), [hereafter Apollodorus, *Library*], Book III, IV 1, pp. 313-5.

¹⁹⁴ Apollodorus, *Library*, Book III, IV 1-2, pp. 315-7.

¹⁹⁵ Ferecides d’Atenes, *Històries Vol. 1*, trans. by Jordi Pàmies (Barcelona: Fundació Bernat Metge, 2008), [hereafter Ferecides, *Històries*], p. 81.

¹⁹⁶ Ferecides, *Històries*, p. 79.

¹⁹⁷ M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999 [1997]), [hereafter West, *The East Face of Helicon*], p. 461.

¹⁹⁸ Apollodorus, *Library*, Book III, IV 2, p. 317.

¹⁹⁹ West, *East Face of Helicon*, pp. 448-9.

Dalley, was not only closely assimilated with *Nergal* but was a Phoenician translation of *Nergal*.²⁰⁰ Richard J. Clifford defines *Melqart* as a dying and rising god associated primarily with the city of Tyre, where his cult appeared in the tenth century BCE, and who was identified with the Greek Herakles; Clifford argues, however, that the term *Melqart* means ‘king of the city’, and that *Melqart* was a chthonic god only in the case that ‘city’ referred to the underworld.²⁰¹ Robert Graves argues that the Pythoness of Delphi addressed Herakles for the first time as Herakles rather than *Palaemon*, and the title of *Palaemon* identified Herakles with Melicertes of Corinth (who was deified under that name), and that Melicertes was *Melqart*, the Tyrian Herakles.²⁰² Burkert argues that there is no question that Herakles was equated to *Melqart* because that was the reason why the pillars of *Melqart* in the temple of Cadiz became the pillars of Herakles.²⁰³ If, as Dalley surmises, *Nergal* was assimilated in Phoenicia as *Melqart*, then *Melqart* could be one possible via of cultural assimilation of attributes of *Nergal* by Ares. In addition to that, *Melqart* was later identified by the Greeks with Herakles, who, according to Homer, was born in the city of Thebes.²⁰⁴ Graves assumes that the central story of Herakles was an early variant of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic which reached Greece via Phoenicia.²⁰⁵

Mary R. Bachvarova surmises that the Phoenician presence in Cyprus by the ninth century BCE allowed a flow of narrative traditions from the Near East, and propounds one possible transmission route:

First being transferred to Cyprus at some time in the Late Bronze Age, then crossing the Mediterranean to Greece centuries later in the first quarter of the first millennium. There is evidence that there was syncretism between Alashiyan and Ugaritic gods.²⁰⁶

In the Late Bronze Age, *Resheph* reappeared as a god armed with arrows, who could spread disease and plague.²⁰⁷ According to Lipinski, *Resheph* was identified with

²⁰⁰ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 164.

²⁰¹ Richard J. Clifford, ‘Phoenician Religion’, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 279 (Aug., 1990), p. 57.

²⁰² Graves, *The Greek Myths*, pp. 463-4.

²⁰³ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 210.

²⁰⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, vol. I, XIV 321, p. 91.

²⁰⁵ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, pp. 450-1.

²⁰⁶ Mary R. Bachvarova, *From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), [hereafter Bachvarova, *Hittite to Homer*], p. 305.

²⁰⁷ Lipinski, *Resheph*, p. 244.

Apollo in Cyprus;²⁰⁸ and according to Bachvarova, *Resheph* was syncretized with Apollo as archer god at Cyprus, and linked with the Apollo that sent the plague on the Greek army at the beginning of *the Iliad*.²⁰⁹ Thus, Apollo might be another example of a Semitic god adopted by the Phoenicians and reinterpreted by the Greeks, via Cyprus.²¹⁰

Besides the identification of *Nergal* with *Resheph* during the third millenium BCE, Lipinski propounds a second identification of *Nergal* with *Resheph* in Tarsus (Cilicia), attested by coins dating around 400 BCE showing an arrow-armed god resting on a lion, with the legend ‘Nergal of Tarsus’.²¹¹ Furthermore, Lipinski argues that a war-god of Tarsus, known as Sanda, was first identified with Nergal and later with Herakles, in the same way that Nergal was identified with Herakles at Palmyra and Hatra.²¹²

***Nergal* and Herakles**

As we have seen, Nergal was son of Enlil, Lord of the Wind.²¹³ According to Homer, Herakles was son of Zeus and Alcmene,²¹⁴ and Zeus, as an atmospheric god, could actually be equated to Enlil. Agreeing with Burkert, Black and Green also propound that Nergal was equated to the Greek Herakles;²¹⁵ Dalley describes Nergal (Erra) as partially assimilated with Gilgamesh on one hand, and with Herakles on the other,²¹⁶ arguing that the myth ‘Erra and Isum’ mentioned Erra as changing his divine nature and becoming like a man,²¹⁷ and such ambivalent nature of Erra, as god and as mortal, was shared by Herakles. In the same way, Herodotus noted that the Greeks worshiped Herakles both as a god and as a dead hero.²¹⁸ Similarly, the Greek god Ares, associated with *Nergal*, was sometimes considered a human. Bremmer

²⁰⁸ Lipinski, *Resheph*, p. 244.

²⁰⁹ Bachvarova, *Hittite to Homer*, pp. 243-4.

²¹⁰ Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*, p. 115.

²¹¹ Lipinski, *Resheph*, pp. 244-5.

²¹² Lipinski, *Resheph*, p. 245.

²¹³ Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, pp. 98-9.

²¹⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, vol. I, XIV 321, p. 91.

²¹⁵ Black, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 136.

²¹⁶ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 283.

²¹⁷ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 302.

²¹⁸ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars: Books 1-2*, trans. by A. D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), II.44, p. 331.

contends that Ares was the only god to fight like a human on the Trojan battlefield.²¹⁹ Ares as human, to a certain extent, was implied when Homer wrote that Ares would have perished, after being bound in a brazen jar for thirteen months, unless Hermes had not liberated Ares.²²⁰

According to Burkert, Oriental motives were present in the myths of Herakles.²²¹ As we have seen, *Nergal* not only emerged as son of Enlil, Lord of the Wind, but was associated with lions and bulls. Hence, Herakles shared similar traits with *Nergal*. The establishment of a fixed cycle of twelve labors, and the prevalence of the iconography of Herakles in the lion skin, can both be dated around 600 BCE.²²² *Nergal*, on the other hand, was a much older god.

For instance, West proposes that the absence of lions in Greece might indicate that the lion-slaying theme originated in the Near East: Enkidu and Gilgamesh killed lions routinely, and *Ninurta* killed ‘the lion, the terror of the gods’.²²³ Similarly, Black argues that whereas lions were not common in Greece, they were in Mesopotamia until the end of the third millennium BCE, adding that in the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods discussed sending a plague of lions instead of the flood.²²⁴ In addition, West sees parallels between the trophies of *Ninurta* and the labors of Herakles, and argues that the Nemean lion, and the seven-headed serpent clearly match creatures killed by *Ninurta*, whereas the bison pictured as a bull-man which is slain in the middle of the sea, might be compared with the Cretan Bull.²²⁵

In his second labor, Herakles was bitten in the foot by an enormous crab while fighting with Hydra.²²⁶ According to West, two Mesopotamian seals that may foreshadow the crab-reptile alliance against the hero: the earliest seal, showing a fight between a hero and a seven-headed serpent, was framed by scorpions, one of which was located right behind the hero; the second seal, Neo-Assyrian of the ninth or eighth century BCE, showed a man aiming an arrow at a big scorpion and snake

²¹⁹ Bremmer, ‘Ares’, p. 85.

²²⁰ Homer, *The Iliad vol. I*, V 385-90, p. 223.

²²¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 209.

²²² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 209.

²²³ West, *The East Face of Helicon*, p. 461.

²²⁴ Black, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 118.

²²⁵ West, *The East Face of Helicon*, pp. 467-9.

²²⁶ Apollodorus, *Library*, Book II, V-2, p. 189.

which reared up vertically before him.²²⁷ Likewise, Burkert argues that the motif of the serpent with seven heads smitten by a god appeared first on Sumerian seal images.²²⁸ In Eshnunna, archeologists found a seal and an alabaster group which resemble the motives associated with Herakles. While the seal depicted a hero-god defeating a multi-headed dragon, the alabaster group depicted a dragon which appeared as an adjunct of the Snake-god.²²⁹ According to Frankfort, the dragon of the alabaster group resembled, except for the multiplicity of heads, the dragon of the seal, and the multi-headed dragon of the seal resembled an Hydra.²³⁰

During the Hellenistic period, the connection between Mars and Hercules persisted. According to Ptolemy, Mars was ‘also called the star of Hercules’,²³¹ and Eratosthenes involved Herakles in the formation of the following constellations: the constellation called ‘the Serpent’ was originally the serpent who guarded the golden apples and was killed by Herakles; the constellation of ‘the Kneeling man’ was Herakles because he had his foot planted on the Serpent; the crab crushed by Herakles fighting the Hydra was transformed into the constellation of Cancer; the constellation called ‘the Lion’ was created to honor the first labor of Herakles;²³² and the constellation of Centaurus was Chiron immortalized by Zeus as compensation for Chiron being killed by an arrow dropped accidentally by Herakles.²³³ Behind those constellations, figures such as the serpent or the lion, or motives such as Herakles fighting, or accidents leading to death, were all in tune with the nature of *Nergal*.

Finally, the coupling Herakles with the formation of the Milky Way reinforced the eastern origins of the myth of Herakles. Eratosthenes explained that Hermes took Herakles after birth to the breast of Hera who, realizing that she was suckling Herakles, pushed him away promptly, and the milk spilled by Herakles created the Milky Way.²³⁴ West argues that the idea of Herakles being suckled by Hera was a

²²⁷ West, *The East Face of Helicon*, p. 461.

²²⁸ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 208-9.

²²⁹ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, pp. 72, 121-2.

²³⁰ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, plate XXXIII j.

²³¹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, I-9, p. 49.

²³² Eratosthenes de Cirene, *Catasterismes*, trans. by Jordi Pàmies (Barcelona: Fundació Bernat Metge, 2004), [hereafter Eratosthenes, *Catasterismes*], pp. 85-7, 89-91, 116-7, 120.

²³³ Eratosthenes, *Catasterismes*, pp. 236-9.

²³⁴ Eratosthenes, *Catasterismes*, pp. 253-4.

common ancient idea in Mesopotamia where many of the Sumerian kings claimed to have been nourished by the milk of the Sumerian goddess *Ninhursaga*.²³⁵

Mars and Nergal

Dorotheus of Sidon described Mars as murderous²³⁶, and considered ‘violent acts or anger or thieves, or the burning of fire’²³⁷ belonging to the nature of Mars.

Dorotheus considered Mars a malefic planet,²³⁸ associated with enemies,²³⁹ and which under certain conditions could bring disaster,²⁴⁰ destruction or squandering of the father’s property,²⁴¹ death²⁴², falling in misery²⁴³, and running away from one’s city²⁴⁴. A malefic Mars matches Nergal as an evil planet. Nergal as enemy, sinister, strange, hostile, liar, false, and robber star, also coincide with the nature of Mars described by Dorotheus. To Dorotheus, some possibilities of death related to Mars were: killed by thieves or by enemies, devoured by lions, burnt by fire, or struck by a sword.²⁴⁵ Fire, enemies, and weapons were attributes of Nergal. By including lions as causes of death associated with Mars, either lions were common to Dorotheus, who was from Sidon (Phoenicia) next to Mesopotamia, or Dorotheus was paraphrasing Babylonian astrologers. Lions were common to Babylonian astrologers who, most likely, were used to see Nergal depicted with leonine features.

Anubio associated Mars was with death (general and violent death), destruction (of the paternal house) either by fire or war, and rulers with the right over life and death.²⁴⁶ Death, destruction, fire, and war were common attributes of *Nergal (Erra)*. Anubio associated Mars with criminals, forgers, liars, athletes, and with bad actions, dangers, and madness.²⁴⁷ Strength (an athlete must be strong) was an attribute of

²³⁵ West, *The East Face of Helicon*, p. 133.

²³⁶ Dorotheus of Sidon, translated by David Pingree, *Carmen Astrologicum* (Abingdon: Astrology Classics, 2005), [hereafter Dorotheus, *Carmen*], I 27, p. 195.

²³⁷ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, I 27, p. 193.

²³⁸ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, I 6, pp. 164-5.

²³⁹ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, IV-1, pp. 256-7.

²⁴⁰ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, I-27, II-19, pp. 193, 223.

²⁴¹ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, I 15-16, II-26, pp. 176-7, 229.

²⁴² Dorotheus, *Carmen*, II-19, II-25, IV-1, pp. 223, 228, 257.

²⁴³ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, II-25, p. 228.

²⁴⁴ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, II-25, p. 228.

²⁴⁵ Dorotheus, *Carmen*, IV-1, p. 256.

²⁴⁶ Anoubion, *Poème Astrologique Termonages et Fragments*, trans. by Paul Schubert (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2015), [hereafter Anoubion, *Poème*], pp. 40-1, 46, 50, 53.

²⁴⁷ Anoubion, *Poème*, pp. 40-1, 46, 53.

Nergal. Finally, the ‘Great Star List’ described *Nergal* as false, sinister, liar, hostile, evil, enemy, and the destructive Panther star. Finally, in Mesopotamia *Nergal* ruled over possessing demons associated with madness.

Anubio linked Mars with those exiled from their country.²⁴⁸ In the ‘Great Star List’, *Nergal* was the enemy star, the strange star, the star of Elam, and the star of Eridu. *Nergal* was a star (planet) indicating people from other countries, including enemies. Hence, *Nergal* could be associated not only with those living abroad, but with those captured, enslaved, and forced to move to another country due to war or conquest.

Marcus Manilius, Roman poet and astrologer of the first century CE, described Mars as scorching and launcher of flames,²⁴⁹ and as a savage war-god waging bloody battles.²⁵⁰ Such description of Mars matches *Nergal* as a fiery god and *Erra* as a scorching and brutal war-god. Manilius associated with Mars those who ‘follow the god of war in hope of booty’.²⁵¹ Thieves and warriors who very likely fought for a booty, were attributes of *Nergal*. Manilius wrote that Pallas was the protectress of Aries and ‘bellicose Scorpion clings to Mars’.²⁵² The word Pallas might have a non-Greek origin, and could be interpreted as Maiden or as the weapon-brandishing.²⁵³ According to Burkert, Athena was the Pallas of Athens, the city goddess, an armed goddess who was also found in the Near East.²⁵⁴ Athena, associated with the winning side of the Trojan war in the Iliad, was a goddess of protection. In the end, however, it was Ares who ended up ruling Aries instead of the smarter and less brutal and sanguinary Athena.

Claudius Ptolemy, Alexandrian astronomer and astrologer of the second century CE, considered Mars a maleficent planet whose nature was destructive and inharmonious,²⁵⁵ and associated Mars with injures from a blow, a thrust, iron, or burning.²⁵⁶ To Ptolemy, Mars caused not only dangers from fire, wounds, bilious

²⁴⁸ Anoubion, *Poème*, p. 40.

²⁴⁹ Manilius, *Astronomica*, trans. by G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006 [1977]), IV-500, pp. 261-3.

²⁵⁰ Manilius, *Astronomica*, III-632, p. 215.

²⁵¹ Manilius, *Astronomica*, IV-402, p. 253.

²⁵² Manilius, *Astronomica*, II-443, p. 117.

²⁵³ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 139.

²⁵⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 140.

²⁵⁵ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. and translated by F. E. Robbins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971 [1940]), [hereafter Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*], I-38, p. 81.

²⁵⁶ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, III-149, p. 323.

attacks, robberies, or the splitting of blood,²⁵⁷ but also quarrels, scheming, enmities, illegitimate relations, disputes, and even lawsuits arising through business or poisoning.²⁵⁸ Those attributes of Mars mentioned by Ptolemy are in line with the attributes associated with Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers.

Vettius Valens, Hellenistic astrologer of the second century CE, associated Ares with losses, diminishment, destruction, plundering, theft, robberies, wars, the military, soldiers, gladiators, armorers, subordinates in the foreign service, slaves, captivity, death, those who have power over life and death, hostile enemies, lies, dangers, violence, fire, and iron.²⁵⁹ The astrological attributes that Valens associated with Mars are in line with the attributes associated with Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers.

Julius Firmicus-Maternus, Latin writer and astrologer of the fourth century CE, considered Mars a malefic planet indicating evils, misfortunes, injures by fire, wandering in foreign countries, and those who become slaves.²⁶⁰ Those attributes of Mars match the fire, evils, foreign countries, and slavery associated with *Nergal*. Besides, the warrior and hero-god Nergal can be attested when Firmicus-Maternus associated Mars with dangers, athletes, and soldiers.²⁶¹ Furthermore, Babylonian astrologers considered Mars a liar; similarly, Firmicus-Maternus associated Mars with deception and abuse.²⁶² Nergal as god of death and king of the netherworld was somehow implied by Firmicus-Maternus when the latter not only associated Mars with violent and sudden death, but described Mars as holding the right over life and death.²⁶³ *Nergal* as ruler over demons could be discerned in Mars when Firmicus-Maternus associated Mars with exorcists and with the power to liberate both the body and the spirit from all kinds of perverse and malevolent demons.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁷ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, III-151, p. 327.

²⁵⁸ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, IV-193-4, p. 419.

²⁵⁹ Vettius Valens, *The Anthology Book II, Part 1*, trans. by Robert Schmidt, ed. by Robert Hand (Berkeley Springs: The Golden Hind Press, 1994), II 17, pp. 20-1, 26-8, II 21, p. 31.

²⁶⁰ Julius Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis: Tome II Livres III-IV*, trans. by P. Monat (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994), [hereafter Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis*], p. 41.

²⁶¹ Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis*, p. 41.

²⁶² Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis*, p. 50.

²⁶³ Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis*, pp. 48, 50.

²⁶⁴ Firmicus-Maternus, *Mathesis*, pp. 49-50.

Paul of Alexandria associated Mars with the military,²⁶⁵ and related Mars with poverty, strained circumstances, losses, destruction of personal enterprises, and those without adequate income.²⁶⁶ *Nergal*, as a god of war and destruction, could indicate not only losses but slavery. Hence Mars, if derived from *Nergal*, may indicate losses and tough circumstances. Paul of Alexandria claimed that Mars indicated wounds, injuries, illnesses, sicknesses, short-lived persons and those who die violently.²⁶⁷ *Nergal*, as a god of war, destruction, and death, could be associated with violence and injuries. *Nergal* was also associated with possessing demons causing illnesses and madness. Paul of Alexandria associated Mars with emigrants, those who lived abroad, and those who die in a foreign or strange land.²⁶⁸ *Nergal*, as indicator of enemies and people from other countries, could be associated with those living abroad. *Nergal* was also a god of death, hence Mars as those who die in a foreign land is also very much in tune with *Nergal*.

The casting of Lots in Hellenistic culture, argues Dorian G. Greenbaum, was a divinatory practice used to know the will of the gods.²⁶⁹ Paul of Alexandria mentioned seven Lots, each one originating from one of the seven planets. According to Greenbaum, each planetary lot embraced qualities associated with that planet, and for Mars the Lot of Courage showed boldness but also rashness.²⁷⁰ Paul of Alexandria associated with Mars the Lot of Boldness (Courage)²⁷¹ and described it as:

the cause of boldness and treachery and strength and all criminal acts.²⁷²

Hence, Paul of Alexandria associated boldness, courage, treachery, strength, and criminal acts with Mars. These three attributes of the Lot of Boldness are in line with the attributes of *Nergal*. Besides, *Nergal* as the false star, the enemy star, the

²⁶⁵ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction to Astrology*, trans. by James H. Holden (Tempe: American Federation of Astrologers, 2012), [hereafter Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*], pp. 48-9.

²⁶⁶ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, pp. 51, 54.

²⁶⁷ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, pp. 48, 50, 54, 104.

²⁶⁸ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, p. 50.

²⁶⁹ Dorian G. Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 280.

²⁷⁰ Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology*, p. 299.

²⁷¹ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, p. 42.

²⁷² Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, p. 43.

destructive Panther star, or the killing god *Erra* most likely would commit treachery and criminal acts.

Heliodorus introduced many extra lots besides the seven Lots mentioned by Paul of Alexandria.²⁷³ Among these extra lots, the ones involved with Mars had a name which coincided with an attribute Mars, such as the Lot of Enemies, the Lot of Destruction, the Lot of Thieves, the Lot of Living abroad, the Lot of Injury, the Lot of Slaves, the Lot of Warfare, or the Lot of military service.²⁷⁴ The name of almost all of the lots associated with Mars are very related to attributes of *Nergal*.

Hephaestio of Thebes considered Mars, along with Saturn, a malefic planet associated with want of arms, war, battles, death, carrying off booty, and slavery.²⁷⁵ Hephaestio of Thebes associated Mars (along with Saturn) with bodily weaknesses, damages, and stoppages.²⁷⁶ Hephaestio also associated Mars with weapons, anger, instability, jealousy, losses, and premature death.²⁷⁷ According to Hephaestio, Dorotheus considered Ares fiery-bright planet associated with heavy diseases, renewed battles, and dreadful violence.²⁷⁸ The attributes of Mars according to Hephaestio, such as death, violence, losses, destruction, war, booty, or injuries, are all quite related to *Nergal*.

Rhetorius the Egyptian associated Mars with losses²⁷⁹, and with the destruction of possessions.²⁸⁰ Rhetorius claimed that Mars would bring about

military commanders, soldiers, troop commanders, rulers of life and death, terrible [in their actions] against cities and countries. [...] hot-blooded, reckless individuals, those livings abroad.²⁸¹

²⁷³ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, p. 122.

²⁷⁴ Paul of Alexandria, *Introduction*, pp. 124-37.

²⁷⁵ Hephaestio of Thebes, *Apotelesmatics, Book III: On Inceptions*, trans. by Eduardo J. Gramaglia (Minneapolis: The Cazimi Press, 2013), [hereafter Hephaestio, *Apotelesmatics*], III.7 1-3, pp. 62-3.

²⁷⁶ Hephaestio, *Apotelesmatics*, III.30 6, p. 95.

²⁷⁷ Hephaestio, *Apotelesmatics*, III.9 38-41, p. 74.

²⁷⁸ Hephaestio, *Apotelesmatics*, III.30 8, p. 95.

²⁷⁹ Rhetorius the Egyptian, translated by James H. Holden, *Astrological Compendium Containing His Explanation and Narration of The Whole Art of Astrology* (Tempeh: American Federation of Astrologers, 2009), [hereafter Rhetorius, *Astrological Compendium*], pp. 57, 67, 72, 75.

²⁸⁰ Rhetorius, *Astrological Compendium*, pp. 67, 69, 72.

²⁸¹ Rhetorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 52.

Furthermore, Rethorius associated Mars with wounds and injuries,²⁸² and cuts from iron²⁸³, with dwelling abroad²⁸⁴, those fearful of the Gods and to daemons²⁸⁵, with being struck by a poisonous animal²⁸⁶, and with death²⁸⁷. The attributes of Mars according to Rethorius match not only the basic qualities of the god *Nergal* but also the astrological attributes associated with Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers.

In conclusion, apart from Iron, which might not be associated with Mars in Mesopotamia (but was associated with weapons and therefore indirectly associated with *Nergal*), most of the attributes of associated with Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers are found, sometimes in an indirect way, in the attributes associated with Mars according by Hellenistic astrologers.

In 1899, Auguste Bouché-Leclercq wrote that Mars resembled the Chaldean god *Nergal*.²⁸⁸ Besides, Bouché-Leclercq argued not only that the Chaldeans associated *Nergal* with war, pestilence, and death, but also of a possible Egyptian tradition which substituted the brutal Ares by the strong but debonair Herakles.²⁸⁹ Bouché-Leclercq was perhaps one of the first scholars to notice a connection between Ares and *Nergal*. However, in Mesopotamia the attribute pestilence originally belonged to *Erra*. Later, pestilence would be assumed by *Nergal*.

According to Baigent, reports of Assyrian astrologers attest that in Mesopotamia, astrologers identified Mars with the god *Nergal*: a war-god, lord of battle, and a god of plague, fevers and pestilence. Baigent surmises that *Nergal* became god of the underworld by marrying the goddess *Ereshkigal*, and concludes that many of the characteristics of the god *Nergal* have remained attached to the planet Mars up to today.²⁹⁰ The source used by Baigent was *The Reports of the Magicians and*

²⁸² Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, pp. 52, 57, 67, 75.

²⁸³ Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 52.

²⁸⁴ Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 52.

²⁸⁵ Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 65.

²⁸⁶ Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 69.

²⁸⁷ Rethorius, *Astrological Compendium*, p. 69.

²⁸⁸ Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie Grecque* (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1979 [1899]), p. 98.

²⁸⁹ Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie Grecque*, p. 98.

²⁹⁰ Baigent, *Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia*, chapter 12.

Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon in the British Museum;²⁹¹ in order to determine the nature of Mars in Babylon, Baigent selected cuneiform tablets in which *Nergal* was mentioned.

Nergal, in the third millennium BCE, was a god of war helping kings to win wars and create empires. *Erra*, on the other hand, was a violent god of death and pestilence. In the myth 'Erra and Ishum', *Erra* was a god of death who brought destruction when he was active. Thus, *Erra* as a god of destruction and plague could be considered a malefic god. In fact, Dorotheus and the rest of the Hellenistic astrologers considered Mars a malefic planet. Most likely, the characteristics of *Nergal* they were using were those of *Erra*.

Conclusion

By the third millennium BCE, *Nergal* was first attested as *ḏKIS.UNU*, god of war and fighting depicted as a bull, and transmitted to Syria as *Resheph*. During the second millennium BCE, *Nergal* was considered son of *Enlil* inheriting attributes which rendered *Nergal* a malefic god; besides, *Nergal* was addressed to as a lion, and associated with demons of leonine features and bringers of disease; moreover, *Nergal* assimilated *Meslamtaea*, *Ninazu*, and became a prominent underworld deity. *Nergal* was also syncretized with *Erra*, a god of death and destruction who most likely reinforced the malefic role of *Nergal*. Lastly, *Nergal* was perhaps assimilated with the Phoenician god *Melqart*.

In Mesopotamia during the first millennium BCE, *Nergal* was associated with the planet Mars. Many attributes, most of them malefic, were assigned to Mars by Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers. In fact, most of these attributes of Mars are attested in the works of Dorotheus of Sidon, Anubio, Manilius, Ptolemy, Valens, Firmicus-Maternus, Paul of Alexandria, Heliodorus, Hephaestio of Thebes, and Rhetorius the Egyptian. Therefore, it is very likely that some attributes of Mars used in Hellenistic astrology came actually from Mesopotamia.

²⁹¹ R. Campbell Thompson, *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh in the British Museum: vol. II* (London: Luzac, 1900), pp. liv, liii, lviii, lxxxviii.

In addition to that, the similarities between the Greek god Ares and *Nergal* may indicate that Ares was derived from *Nergal*; and one possible via of transmission was the Phoenician god *Melqart*. Finally, the eastern motives present in the myth of Herakles, the motives of Ares present in the myth of the foundation of the Greek city of Thebes, and the connection of Thebes with the Phoenician city of Tyre, along with the attributes of *Nergal* present in the constellations related to Herakles, may indicate that *Melqart* was probably transmitted to Greece as Herakles.

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