Apkallu

I. Introduction. Mesopotamian semi-divine figure. A Babylonian tradition related by Berossos in the 3rd cent. (BURSTEIN 1978: 13f) describes a creature called Oannes that rose up out of the Red Sea in the first year of man’s history. His entire body was that of a fish, but he had another head, presumably human, and feet like a man as well as a fish tail. He taught men to write, as well as many other arts, crafts, and institutions of civilization. He taught them to build cities and temples, to have laws, to till the land, and to harvest crops. At sunset he returned to the sea. Later there were other similar creatures who appeared on the earth. These were the sages.

The sage Adapa, a priest of Eridu created by the god Ea/Enki, was also called Oannes. The name Oannes was thus connected, by true or false etymology, with the common noun for a sage in early Akkadian ummi‘nunum, later ummi‘nunum. The other Akkadian term for a sage, apkallu, can also mean a type of priest or exorcist. According to a Sumerian temple hymn, the seven sages came from Eridu, the first city in the Sumerian King List. Since Eridu was the city of Ea who lived in the Apsu, iconography involving water and fish is to be expected for the sages. According to late Assyrian and Babylonian texts, legendary kings were credited early on with having sages.

The Epic of Erra and Isum (probably 8th cent.) attributes to Marduk the banishing of the sages (here called a.) down to the Apsu, and not allowing them to return. He describes them as pure purâdu-fish, perhaps carp, who like their master Ea are especially clever, and were put among mortals before their banishment.

The ritual text bit mēseri, for encircling a house with protective magical figurines, gives names to the sages of some famous kings in various cities (REINER 1961; BÖRGER 1974; see also HUNGER 1983: nos. 8-11). Some of those sages angered the gods. Ziusuda, also known as Utnapishtim and Atrahasis, was probably the last sage before the flood, the event which marks the division between immortal and mortal sages. Later sages were part mortal, part divine. Kings credited with a sage include Enmerkar, Shulgi, Enlil-bani of Isin, Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar I, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon, but this time span (legendary/Early Dynastic [26th cent.] to mid 7th cent.) does not match that of the identified iconography.

Certain texts are attributed to sages, notably two medical texts and a hymn (REINER 1961), the Myth of Etana, the Sumerian Tale of Three Ox-drivers, the Babylonian Theodicy, and the astrological series UD.SAR Anum Enlilla. In Assyrian tradition the sages guarded the Tablet of Destinies for the god Nabu, patron of scribes. This information gives a possible link with the composite monsters in the tradition of the Babylonian Epic of Creation, which centers on control of the Tablet of Destinies. Such a link would explain the scene that puts phenotype 1 (see § II.1) with composite monsters who fight as archers (24), and phenotype 2 (see § II.2) with mermen (44*, 51) and composite monsters (50*). However, in known versions of the Epic, the hero-god, not the composite monsters, is called a sage; thus the relationship is not clear.

The deities Ea, Damkina, Gula, Enlil, Adad, Marduk, Nabu, and Gerra were all called “sage of the gods” in texts on particular occasions; the link with Ea is apparent for type 2 from 40, 47–48, and with Marduk and Nabu from 63. A link between type 2 and the moon god Sin is shown on 45 and probably with Adad on 15*.

Exceptional people such as Sennacherib, his wife Naqia, and their grandson Assurbanipal were called sage, a./apkallatu, whether as flattery or as a result of specific circumstances. A 7th cent. queen of Arabia was also given the title of sage, perhaps related to the meaning of the cognate as a type of priest in early Arabia (BÖRGER 1957). This may be linked to the appearance of unbearded type 1 sages whose garments differ from those of bearded sages (1*-2, 27–30).

One of the questions relevant for the three iconographic types of sages is whether they refer to categories of sage related to different periods in time – preflood, intermediate (i.e., Ziusuda-Atrahasis who lived through the flood), and postflood; or to different functions such as writers of medical texts or court wisdom; or whether chronological and/or regional traditions account for different types and associations.

II. Typology


General remarks. No single image definitively represents the sages. However, three main types can be distinguished: the human-figured, winged A. (type 1); the fish-cloaked (type 2); and the bird-headed, winged A. (type 3). They have been identi-
fied chiefly on the basis of iconographic similarities but also because of evidence in inscriptions (Wiggermann 1992: passim) and in Berossos' account.

The commonest pose is that of a standing figure holding his left hand forward or downward, while his right hand is raised. When mirror-image pairs are found, left and right are reversed. All three types are commonly found with the downward hand holding a bucket/situla (3, 5-6*, 10*-16, 21-22, 23-26, 28-30, 33*-36*, 39*-55*, 60, 62*-63, 67, 70). Most frequently when the left hand carries a bucket, the raised right hand holds a cone (6*, 10*-11, 15*-16, 21-22, 23-24, 26, 28-29, 38-39*, 42*-43, 62*, 70). whose precise function is not certain (Wiggermann 1992: 67), but the raised hand may also be empty (not often clear on seals and seal impressions, clear on 5, 13-14*, 77). Less often types 1 and 3 hold in one hand or the other a sprig (9*, 12*, 17-18, 20, 31-32, 39*), a mace (4, 20), or a stag (18). Furthermore, the bearded A.s of type 1 normally, and type 3 often, wear a kilt of above-the-knee length with a tasseled fringe and a full-length cutaway robe or skirt, which leaves the forward leg bare from the knee downward (3, 5-18, 20-23, 25-27, 29, 35-36*, 39*, 68*-69). On detailed representations of types 1 and 3, two daggers and a whetstone are usually tucked into the waist (1*, 6*, 17, 20, 22, 26, 39*). They wear a pair of bracelets at a rosette at each wrist (1*, 6*, 10*, 16-18, 20, 22, 26) a spiral armlet just above the elbow (6*, 17), and sometimes a single-stranded necklace (6*, 10*, 17-18, 20, 22, 39*) with up to eight (?) pendants (1*-2).

Types 1 and 3 appear more frequently than type 2 in mirror-image pairs on either side of a stylized sacred tree (1*, 7, 13, 24, 29, 39*), a god (15*, 69), or a king (68*). Types 1 and 2 appear together on 12*, 33*-34, and 38. Types 1 and 3 appear together on 7, 21, and 36*.

1. HUMAN-FigureD A.

1.1. Phenotypes. The human-figured A. is rarely associated with a deity (27). In a few cases the human-figured A. is associated with hybrid animals (24), as on the Hebrew seal 8* (if genuine), where a winged, man-faced bull Aladammu (→Human-headed winged bull) serves as a pedestal animal for a divine figure; and on 11, where an unbearded, human-faced winged lion →sphinx supports the mirror-image pair of A. If genuine, 9* is another West Semitic (or rather South Semitic) seal with this type of A. standing alone.

Mirror-image pairs stand on each side of a stylized sacred →tree (1*, 7, 13, 24, 29, 39*), the tree sometimes surmounted by a ←winged disc (11-12*). This scene is frequently attested on palace sculptures from the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II (883-859) at Nimrud (6*, Paley/Sobolewski 1987; 1991 passim). The scene is found in a location of high prestige, on a panel set behind the throne dais in the main throne room, where the →king stands in mirror-image at the tree, and the ←winged disc is also shown. Occasionally the winged disc is supported by a kneeling →atlantid figure (14*). Other variations include streams of water coming from the winged disc (14*). Mirror-image figures may also stand on either side of a doorway without a central motif such as a sacred tree. On the rare occasions when this type does not be-

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long to a mirror-image arrangement, he may stand, for example, behind a man with a fly-whisk and bowl, facing the enthroned king (26).

The type occurs as a group of six or more clay figurines placed in brick boxes in foundations at Assur, Nimrud, and Nineveh (RITTIG 1977: passim). Ritual texts show that figurines of this type were often made of e’ru wood (WIEGGERMANN 1992: 65), and thus have not survived.

2. Fish–cloak A.

2.1. Phenotypes. The fish-cloak A. (12*, 33*–35, 40–66), a human figure wearing a fish-cloak suspended from the top of his head and with the head of a fish on top of his human head, corresponds to Barrossos’ description of the first sage, Oannes. He is always bearded and never has wings. The fish-cloak is either worn over the naked body (33*–34*, 42*, 47–48), the typical garb of the A.s (40, 44*), or a full-length flounced robe (52*, 55*). On some Late Bronze Age items the fish-cloak is full-length (52*) or ends just below the waist (34*). The latter type is also attested on some 9th/8th cent. depictions (48, 55*; but not 64), and reaches almost to the ground on representations of the 8th/7th cent. (35, 38, 45–46, 49–51, 53–54, 58–62*). The beard is normally of the typical Assyrian shape, but is forked on 57–58, and 62*. The fish-cloak A. rarely has two daggers tucked in at his waist (55*). Occasionally the fish-cloak A. wears a horned crown with a single pair of horns, shown between his brow and the fish-head, indicating the status of a minor divinity(56, 59, 62*).

2.2. Associations. The fish-cloak A. is associated with water (33*, 40, 63) and with mermen whose upper body is human, the lower half a fish; this is the kulullû who fights in →Tiamat’s army in the Epic of Creation (44*, 51, 63). The fish-cloak A. is found with the →goat-fish, symbol of →Ea (47–48, 50*); appears together with deities (40, 42*, 45–46, 48); next to a sacred →tree (44*), which is often surmounted by a →winged disc (38, 42*–43, 49, 52*); with a winged disc alone supported by a kneeling figure (33*–34*); or with a priest (63). He may function as a filling motif in a scene with an offerings table and divine symbols (41*), and in a contest scene in which a hero dominates winged scorpion men, a composite being which fights in Tiamat’s army in the Epic of Creation (50*).

Three exceptional pieces are described here in more detail. The fish-cloak A. is depicted on →Lamashtu-amulets as a mirror-image pair standing at a sick man’s bed (35). The unpublished Assyrian or Babylonian amulet-seal 63 shows a god in a winged disc above a sacred tree, which is flanked by mermen. Approaching from the left is a priest in a tall headdress followed by the fish-cloak A., approaching a →mushhushshu-dragon that bears on its back symbols of →Marduk and →Nabu.

A stone tank for water, found at Assur and inscribed by Sennacherib (704–681) (40), represents the Apsu and shows repeated fish-cloak A.s holding cone and bucket pointing the cone toward a figure holding an overflowing vase, sculptured around the sides. This example possibly represents the sages as priests of Ea in Eridu in the Babylonian tradition. These contexts related to water are not found on Assyrian palace sculpture or ivory carving, and may belong to a Babylonian rather than an Assyrian tradition.

No Akkadian word for this type has been identified. In BARNET 1998: pls. 360–361 it is misleadingly described as being the god →Dagon.


3.1. Phenotypes. This hybrid sage (7, 21, 36*, 39*, 67–80), also called griffindemon, Nisroch, or simply genie, is a human body with the head of a bird of prey (perhaps an eagle or a vulture). It usually appears with one or two wings, each perhaps representing a pair of wings; but also with four (80). Like type 1, a pair of mirror-image figures is frequently shown, e.g., on 39*.

Some examples show the bird-of-prey-headed A. with a long, high crest as on 76*, which has two ringlets falling on to the shoulder. On other examples there are three curls on top of the head (71*–72, 74, 78*–79). For jewelry the figure may wear a necklace with seven strands (76*), which may also only be single-stranded with pendants (7). Rosette bracelets are sometimes shown on each wrist (67). The beak is usually closed, but occasionally open to show the tongue (74, 78*–79), as if emitting a cry (80). On Late Bronze/Early Iron Age seals the figure is often shown naked (33*–34*, 47–48, 72, 74); at later periods the dress is similar to that of the anthropomorphic sage and the fish-cloak A. on most examples, although the knees are entirely covered by the over-garment on 77. The so-called “fish-tail fringe” dangling from the kilt (76*) is not a fish part, and so does not indicate that the type is a fish composite. WIEGGERMANN (1992: 75) considers that this type belongs to an Assyrian tradition, and regards all late 2nd mill. examples as Mid-

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dle Assyrian. Other deviations from the standard representation include the replacement of the cone in the right hand with a sprig as on 71*. The pose of having both hands raised without holding any object (77) is also unusual. The figure appears to pluck a bud or sprig from the sacred tree on 75*, 78*, and 79.

3.2. Associations. A pair of bird-of-prey-headed A.s often stands on each side of a sacred tree (7) or a royal figure (69), or with a plant (78*–79) or a deity (36*, 70, 74), with six-curl heroes holding the sacred tree (71*). The figure occurs with type 1 on sequences with three registers at doorways (6*). On 72 and 73 an altar is held up by a pair of naked A.s (in a very similar scene [MATTHEWS 1990: no. 452] a pair of mermen perform a similar function).

Assyrian ritual texts describe clay figurines of this type (WIGGERMANN 1992: passim) as foundation figurines buried in groups of seven or more, with black paint, traces of which have occasionally been observed on such clay figurines, including one with black and red stripes painted on the back.

4. Problematic identifications. The three types are identified from ritual texts and labels on figurines, but because the evidence is uncommon and sometimes ambiguous there are uncertainties. Change over time may also account for some difficulties. Some overlap in the iconography with Tiamat’s composite monsters from the theme of the Epic of Creation is possible, as mentioned above. Single objects such as bucket or sprig may be held by figures who do not share other characteristics with definite sages. WIGGERMANN (1992: 75) identifies A.s in scenes in which figures resembling types 1 and 3 carry weapons and attack animals and monsters. This is not certain, as the bird-headed A. may overlap in form with the Anzu bird in its 1st mill. appearance, and various winged or wingless man-figures may be hero-gods rather than A.s.

WIGGERMANN’s identifications are largely accepted (WIGGERMANN/GREEN 1993-97) and are followed here, but disagreement, and a proposal to identify the Lahmu-hero with three pairs of curls as a further type, are suggested by RUSSELL (1991: 312 n. 27; also ORNAN 1993: 60). Antediluvian and postdiluvian sages might be expected to be differentiated, but no clear distinction has been found. Occasionally type 1 may be wingless, including scenes at the bedside of a sick man where he accompanies the fish-cloak A. (e.g., KOLBE 1981: pls. 5:2; 6:2; →Lamashu amulets listed by WIGGERMANN 1992: 75) but this is uncertain, since the bucket and type of dress might show the function for a mortal. This wingless type is thought by WIGGERMANN (1992: 74f) to be sages before the flood, an identification based on a possible but unfounded connection with the Sumerian names of those early sages. Their human appearance might be more appropriate for mortal sages who lived after the flood, or they may not be sages at all.

Several possible identifications on West Semitic seals cannot be regarded as certain; ORNAN 1993: 60, figs. 11-12 show a kneeling atlantid figure not generally considered to be an A., and figs. 15, 17, and 18 are dubious because the seal cutting is so skinny.

The number of wings shown may sometimes be misleading; perspective or spacing may reduce them, and some scholars think a pair of wings shown in side profile represent four. When a single wing is shown (71*, 76*) a pair can be presumed. Similarly, the number of horns shown on crowns of divinity may have been reduced due to considerations of space; they do not appear to distinguish different ranks of sage.

Color may have been used to differentiate between types and eliminate ambiguities, but is not preserved except as occasional traces of paint on foundation figurines.

On Urartian bronzes and on other media, e.g., MERHAV 1991: 144 and 309, a pair of winged, human-headed lions with cone and bucket on each side of a tree of life has a context and attributes identical to that of the A.s, but cannot be identified as such without textual support.

The scorpion-man (→Girtablullu), the Kusarikku-bison, and the Ugallu-demon, who all fight in the army of Tiamat in the Epic of Creation, were attributed to the category of A. by ORNAN (1993: 56) on a misunderstanding of GREEN (1984: 83). The confusion may have validity in some contexts, since sages are said to guard the Tablet of Destinies for Nabu, a modification of a theme from the Epic of Creation. Possible links are mentioned under individual phenotypes above.

In the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II, RICHARDSON (1999-2001) proposed that types 1 and 3 with the sacred tree are connected with rituals to ensure the blessing of royal ancestors.

III. Sources

III.1. Chronological range. All three types begin to appear in the late 2nd mill. Some possible antecedents are noted by GREEN (1993-97: 252; see also nos. 66-
70 belonging to the early Atlantid series, which Matthews 1990: 109 dates to the 14th cent.). They could, however, have had a different connotation before being adopted into the sages tradition. Although late texts attribute the tradition of sages to early historical times, no iconographic evidence supports such antiquity for the tradition. Early dated examples of type 2 on sculpture come from the Terqa (Tell Ashara) stela of Tukulti-Ninurta II (890-884) (67) and the entrance to the Ninurta temple at Nimrud, probably installed by Assurnasirpal II (883-889) (55*). Huge sculptures of the fish-cloak A. were used likewise in the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib (704-681) (53–54). Type 3 first appears on Middle Assyrian seals, and becomes popular in the 9th-7th cent. both in Assyria and Urartu, often in combination with the sacred tree.

Type 2, on the other hand, appears around the same time in Babylonia, and is taken over in Assyria in the 9th-7th cent. Type 1 may have begun early in Assyria of the 1st millennium. Type 2 is found in Achaemenid (66) and Seleucid (McEwan 1982: nos. 30, 40) times.

III.2. Geographical distribution. As shown above, Assyria is the region where Types 1 and 2 were first found, with extension of Type 1 to Carchemish, and of Types 1 and 3 to West Semitic stamp seals (if they are genuine) and to Urartu, probably all under Assyrian influence. The Babylonian Type 2 is more restricted, moving from Babylonia into Assyria, but from there to Pasargadai in Western Iran, and thence to Seleucid art (McEwan 1982: nos. 30, 40). Types 1 and 3 occur in Neo-Hittite/Aramaean sculpture at Carchemish (30), Sakcegozzi (80), and Malatya (31–32).

III.3. Object types. The three types mainly occur on Assyrian palace sculpture (1*-2, 6*-7, 17-18, 20, 22, 26, 53-55*, 67, including representations on buckets held by sages [e.g., Paley 1976: pls. 16, 20, 28a-b] and on garments Paley 1976: pl. 24a), on Assyrian wall-painting (16, 19), on seals (8*-9, 11-14*, 33*-34*, 38, 41*-47, 52*, 63, 68*-75*) or seal impressions (3-5, 49-51), carved ivory (10*, 21, 76*-79) found in Assyria, as groups of apotropaic clay figurines (56-62*), on amulet plaques (35), on various Urartian objects (15*, 24-25, 27-29, 36*, 77) of stone and metal (pendants, horse frontlets, etc.), and as clay foundation figures (65). None are found on boundary stones of the Kassite and post-Kassite periods, nor on sealings from Emar tablets of the 12th cent., nor among mid-7th cent. sculptures from Assurbanipal’s North Palace at Nineveh.

IV. Conclusion. The discrepancy between the written tradition in which the sages represent early antiquity, and the much later chronology of the iconographic evidence is striking. Babylonian and Assyrian traditions seem to have arisen separately. The diffusion of the probably Assyrian types 1 and 3 is different from that of the essentially Babylonian type 2. Types 1 and 3 are closely associated with royal ritual in their scenes with the sacred tree and winged disc, and type 2 is especially associated with sickness, presumably as a healer. These associations make it likely that the bucket and cone, a hallmark of all three types, represent purification and blessing.

V. Catalogue


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