

God on a serpent throne

I. Introduction. *Elamite god.* There are many difficulties in identifying specific Elamite gods in the visual record. Reasons for these problems include a limited iconographic repertoire (HARPER et al. 1992: 107, 130); the predominance of documentation coming from only one area, Susiana; and the complete lack of any written data on Elamite mythology (MIROSCHEJJI 1980: 129; KOCH 1995: 1959; GNOLI 1987: 277; VALLAT 1998a: 337). Also, much of the visual evidence is fragmentary and/or displaced from its original context (see VALLAT 1998a: 335f). The one deity frequently attested in the visual record from Elam is a male deity seated on a serpent throne. The figure may hold flowing waters, the rod and the ring, and/or serpents (MIROSCHEJJI 1980: 131; MIROSCHEJJI 1981). The debate continues on whether this deity represents Inshushinak, Napirisha, or some other deity. Indeed, the serpent throne and/or the various attributes may have referred to different deities in different contexts (HARPER et al. 1992: 118; see also the discussion below).

Inshushinak was the patron deity of the city of Susa. He is attested as *d.nin-šušinak* (“Lord of Susa”) in a god list from Abu Salabikh by the middle of the 3rd mill. (HINZ 1976–80; POTTS 1999: 58) and in the earliest known document written in Elamite, apparently a treaty between an Elamite king (perhaps Hita) and the Akkadian king Naramsin (CARTER/STOLPER 1984: 14; KOCH 1995: 1960; POTTS 1999: 111). Inshushinak was equated with →Ninurta, the patron god of Nippur, as well as with →Shamash (KOCH 1995: 1962f; VALLAT 1998a: 335). The realms of influence of the god were apparently wide-ranging; final judgment of the dead (HINZ 1972: 46f; HINZ 1976–80: 118; MALBRAN-LABAT 1995; KOCH 1995: 1963; VALLAT 1998a: 339f) and royal investiture figured prominently (HINZ 1972: 45–47; VALLAT 1998a: 340; POTTS 1999: 211). He was addressed as “Father of the Weak” and “King of Gods” (KOCH 1995: 1963; HINZ 1972: 45) and concerned with warfare and justice (KOCH 1995: 1963). The importance of the god can also be seen in the many Elamite royal names that are compounded with the god’s name (e.g., Puzur-Inshushinak) and the numerous invocations of the god in inscriptions by Elamite kings from the Old Elamite down through the Neo-Elamite periods (many listed in POTTS 1999: tables 4.12; 6.4; 7.3, 7–8, 10; HARPER et al. 1992: 266f, cat. nos. 185–186). The inscription on the bronze statue of Queen Napir-Asu (wife of

Untash-Napirisha, ca. 1340–1300), found on the Acropole mound at Susa, specifically mentions three deities whom modern scholars have identified as the “titular triad of the (Middle Elamite) empire”: Napirisha, the god of the Elamite highlands, Kiririsha, the great goddess, and Inshushinak (HARPER et al. 1992: 132–134, whence the quote; POTTS 1999: 218; note also HINZ 1972: 46, in which Napirisha is equated with Humban).

Two sites, Susa and Al Untash-Napirisha, account for the bulk of the evidence for the god. At Susa a large temple dedicated to Inshushinak was located on the western edge of the Acropole mound (HARPER et al. 1992: 123f, fig. 41; VALLAT 1998a: 335ff). The temple may have been founded at the time of the Neo-Sumerian ruler Shulgi (2094–2047) (PITTMAN 1997: 109; POTTS 1999: 132, for Shulgi’s “restoration” of the temple); by the Middle Elamite period the temple was elevated above the other buildings on the Acropole mound. In Morgan trench 27 on the Acropole mound a group of objects composed of precious materials was found, perhaps dating to the reign of the Middle Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte I (1190–1155). Some scholars have taken the deposit, known as the “Inshushinak deposit” or the “*Trouvaille de la statuette d’or*,” to be a type of foundation; others believe it is some type of funerary deposit (CARTER/STOLPER 1984: 167; HARPER et al. 1992: 124, 145–153). On the south-eastern edge of the Acropole mound the remains of a small temple was perhaps dedicated to Inshushinak (Morgan trenches 16 and 17; AMIET 1967; POTTS 1999: 264, 297; HARPER et al. 1992: 126). Some of the inscribed bricks from the structure, made by Shutruk-Nahhunte II (716–699) in the Neo-Elamite period, carry dedications to Inshushinak. Additional inscriptional evidence from the Acropole suggests that there may have been additional structures on the mound dedicated to Inshushinak in the Middle Elamite period (HARPER et al. 1992: 125; note also CARTER/STOLPER 1984: 157; VALLAT 1998a: 336f). A temple of the god on the Apadana mound had relief bricks in the forms of a frontal figure, a bull-man, and date palms; the bricks carry inscriptions of Kutir-Nahhunte (1155–1150) and Shilhak-Inshushinak (1150–1120) recording the restoration and reconstruction of a sanctuary dedicated to Inshushinak (HARPER et al. 1992: 126, 141–144 [cat. no. 88, for the restored relief brick façade]). Based on the discovery of Middle Elamite inscribed bricks, yet another temple of the

god may also have been located on the Ville Royale mound (HARPER et al. 1992: 126).

The great ziggurat complex at Al Untash-Napirisha (modern Choga Zanbil) is the second major site for the worship of Inshushinak. Inscribed bricks record that Untash-Napirisha built the complex (MIROSCHEDEJI 1997: 487; see also CARTER-STOLPER 1984: 37f, 160f). GHIRSHMAN (1966; 1968), the excavator of the site, identified two major phases of the ziggurat complex. There were apparently two temples dedicated to Inshushinak in the first phase (HARPER et al. 1992: 9f, 130; MIROSCHEDEJI 1997: 487). The program in the second phase, also undertaken by Untash-Napirisha, transformed the space by incorporating the original building into the lowest step of a ziggurat that carried at its summit a temple dedicated to both Inshushinak and Napirisha. In addition, there were shrines to many other deities in the sanctuary (MIROSCHEDEJI 1997: 487f; POTTS 1999: 222ff counts no fewer than twenty-five deities for whom building inscriptions document one or more shrines at the site). The renovation of the sanctuary and textual evidence have been interpreted as short-lived attempts by Untash-Napirisha to control the lowlands (represented by Inshushinak/Susa) and highlands (represented by Napirisha/Anshan) through a union of the major deities of each of these areas (CARTER-STOLPER 1984: 38, 160–163; MIROSCHEDEJI 1997: 490). Currently no evidence exists for the worship of the god in the Achaemenid period (KOCH 1995: 1963).

Napirisha, literally “great god” (*napir + risha*; note also DINGIR.GAL in Sumerian, and *ilû rabu* in Akkadian [HINZ 1965]), was generally associated with the eastern highlands of Elam. He became one of the most important gods in the Elamite pantheon and had wide-ranging influence (MIROSCHEDEJI 1980; HARPER et al. 1992: 8, 118; KOCH 1998–2001: 163f; KOCH 1995: 1962). Napirisha’s consort was Kiririsha, whose name essentially meant “great goddess.” GRILLOT (1986: 179) noted the “rapport” between Kiririsha and the Sumero-Akkadian goddess →Ninhursaga, and saw a parallel in the unions of →Ea/Enki–Ninhursaga and Napirisha–Kiririsha. The general consensus is that Napirisha was first and foremost the “dynastic” god of Anshan in the Elamite highlands (in opposition to Inshushinak, the “dynastic” god of Susa in the Elamite lowlands; e.g., MIROSCHEDEJI 1980: 136f; VALLAT 1998: 308; VALLAT 1998a: 335). HINZ (1965; note also HINZ 1972: 44f) read *napir + riša* as an epithet of the god Humban; the epithet eventually stood for

stood for the god’s name. MIROSCHEDEJI (1980: 129–137) argued for two separate deities, Humban and Napirisha, whose epithets were essentially interchangeable and each of which was honored by the Elamites as a “great god.” This interpretation has generally been more widely accepted (e.g., KOCH 1995: 1962; see also VALLAT 1998a: 340). In an Assyrian incantation series, Napirisha was equated with Ea/Enki (KOCH 1998–2001: 163; KOCH 1995: 1962; MIROSCHEDEJI 1980: 131). MIROSCHEDEJI (1980: 133–137) notes the earliest appearance of the god’s name does not occur until the 19th cent. Thereafter he appears as a major deity with the patron god of Susa, Inshushinak. Starting in the reign of Untash-Napirisha (ca. 1340–1300), the god appears very prominently in surviving inscriptions, e.g., on the bronze statue of Queen Napir-Asu (see above). Napirisha appears to have been the personal god of Untash-Napirisha (MIROSCHEDEJI 1980: 135, 142) and figured prominently in the re-formation of the sanctuary at Al Untash-Napirisha, from whence the most abundant physical evidence for the importance of the god comes (see above). Another temple near the northern gate to the ziggurat at Al Untash-Napirisha was also dedicated to Napirisha (MIROSCHEDEJI 1997: 488). Inscribed bricks from Anshan (modern Malyan) record that one Hutelutush-Inshushinak (ca. 1120) built a temple dedicated to several gods, among whom was Napirisha (LAMBERT 1972: 66; MIROSCHEDEJI 1980: 143; VALLAT 1998a: 338; POTTS 1999: 247). The worship of Napirisha survived at least into the Achaemenid period, where he is mentioned in two texts from the Fortification archive (HALLOCK 1969: PF 353 and 354) at Persepolis, dating to the reign of Darius I (522–486).

II. Typology

II.1. Phenotypes

Most of the evidence for the god on the serpent throne dates from the 2nd mill. It includes in particular the rock-cut relief at Kurangun in Western Fars, near the site of Anshan (1*). The right- and left-hand panels of the relief are Middle and/or Neo-Elamite in date. The central panel is generally dated sometime in the *sukkalmah* period (first half of the 2nd mill.; e.g., SEIDL 1986: 11–13). The main figure is a male deity with horned crown who sits on a coiled serpent throne. He apparently holds in his left hand one or two serpents, and in his right hand a rod and ring. Water flows out from the rod and ring toward the first of three worshippers approaching from both the left and the right, the water thus forming

a canopy over the central scene (SEIDL 1986: 8; note, however, POTTS 1999: 182, where the rod and ring are read as a “flowing vase,” perhaps following BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982: 176, no. 128). Behind the seated male deity sits a female deity with a horned crown. VANDEN BERGHE (1986: 159, fig. 2) reconstructed the goddess holding a pair of serpents in her left hand (but see the comments of SEIDL 1986: 9f, where this is shown to be an accidental fissure in the rock). Commentators are divided on the identifications of the figures at Kurangun (SEIDL 1986: 20–22 for a review of the scholarship; note more recently HARPER et al. 1992: 118; POTTS 1999: 182, where “the goddess Napirisha” is an erroneous reading of VANDEN BERGHE’s [1986: 159] interpretation of the goddess seated behind the male god as Kiririsha). However, the majority appear to prefer identifying Napirisha as the male figure seated on the serpent throne (e.g., AMIET 1979; VANDEN BERGHE 1986: 159; HINZ 1972: 51–53, Napirisha/Humban; AMIET in HARPER et al. 1992: 8, the Elamite mountain god Napirisha accompanied by his wife; KOCH 1995: 1962; VALLAT 1998a: 338; see MIROSCHEJJI 1980: 139 and MIROSCHEJJI 1981 for the god as Inshushinak; SEIDL 1986: 20f appears to reject both identifications).

A poorly preserved rock-cut relief at Naqsh-i Rostam, greatly damaged by the carving of the court scene of Bahram II (276–293) in the Sasanian period, shows in one part two deities seated on serpent thrones (SCHMIDT 1970: 121, pls. 87–88; SEIDL 1986: 14–19, fig. 2b, pls. 11b–15; POTTS 1999: 182; HINZ 1972: 52f). The date is unknown. SEIDL (1986: 17–19) suggests either 17th–15th cent. or 12th cent. for the main scene.

Glyptic from the *sukkalmah* period also preserves many important examples of the male deity seated on a serpent throne (2*; see also POTTS 1999: fig. 6.5; SEIDL 1986: 20f; ARUZ in HARPER et al. 1992: 107).

One should also note the fragmentary sandstone stela (HARPER et al. 1992: 125, 127–130, cat. no. 80) of Untash-Napirisha (1340–1300). Found at Susa on the Acropole mound (in the south-western structure), this famous stela has generated much discussion regarding the identification of the deities depicted on it. On the top register a king, identified as Untash-Napirisha by the inscription on his arm, approaches a male deity who may have been seated on a serpent throne (not preserved in the fragment). The god may also hold a horned, fire-spitting serpent in his left hand and the rod and ring in his right hand (pres-

ervation is, however, very poor in these passages). In the dedicatory inscription in the upper register, King Untash-Napirisha prays for Inshushinak to grant him “a royalty and a dynasty of happiness” (HARPER et al. 1992: 130). The inscriptional evidence seems to indicate that the seated god at the top is Inshushinak (as MIROSCHEJJI 1981), but many commentators have in fact identified the figure as Napirisha (see the discussion in HARPER et al. 1992: 130, and above on the Kurangun rock relief). The occurrence of the term *siyan kuk* in the inscription, a term used to designate the sacred precinct at Al Untash-Napirisha (modern Choga Zanbil), would seem to indicate that the stela originally stood at Al Untash-Napirisha and was later brought to Susa, perhaps as part of the program associated with the Mesopotamian monuments brought to Susa by Shutruk-Nahhunte I (1190–1155) (HARPER et al. 1992: 125, 130).

II.2. Associations

1. ASSOCIATED WITH DEITIES/DEMONS: Ea/Enki, serpent god. In instances where the god on a serpent throne is associated with flowing water, he may have some connection with the Mesopotamian water god →Ea/Enki (MIROSCHEJJI 1981; HARPER et al. 1992: 130). The god on the serpent throne may also have associations with a serpent god shown on images from the Akkadian period (HARPER et al. 1992: 107, 111f, cat. no. 71, apparently following SEIDL 1986: 21).

2. ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANS: Worshipper. The god on the serpent throne is often shown approached by a worshipper, many times of royal or elite status. One can assume that the scene showing the king approaching a seated deity, as in Mesopotamia, is connected with legitimization of kingship (HARPER et al. 1992: 117f).

III. Conclusion. Owing to the importance of Napirisha and Inshushinak in textual documentation from Elam, it is only natural that many commentators have linked one or both of them with the image of a male deity seated on a serpent throne holding flowing waters, the rod and the ring, and/or serpents. Given the fragmentary state of the evidence, however, the possibility must be left open that in some contexts the image may also have referred to other deities.

V. Catalogue

1* Rock-cut relief, 3.5 x 1.65 m, Kurangun, 1650. SEIDL 1986: 7–13, figs. 1–2a, pls. 1–11a; VANDEN BERGHE 1986: 2* Seal impression (on tablet), clay, 44* x 39 mm, Susa, 1690–1655. Paris. Louvre Museum, Sb 8748. POTTS 1999: fig. 6.4

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