Magic and Witchcraft in the Ancient Near East
NEJS 122A - Fall 2018
Prof. Tzvi Abusch

Course Description:
Magical literature, rituals, and beliefs in the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia. Topics include demonology, illness, prayer, exorcism, and theodicy, with special attention to witchcraft.

Course Requirements:
Undergraduates:
1. Attendance at all lectures is expected. Students are allowed two unexcused absences. More absences may endanger your grade and can lead to failure.
2. All assigned general and specific secondary readings as well as primary sources are to be read.
3. Abstracts of a select number of assigned readings are to be submitted on Latte at Friday by 5:00 p.m. These same readings will usually have been discussed sometime during the preceding Monday or Wednesday in a graduate student presentation.
4. Students will submit two text analyses. These analyses will examine elements or aspects of a magical ceremony: 1) A god or demon figure addressed in an incantation or prayer and/or otherwise involved in the ceremony (3 pages, double spaced, due on Friday, Oct. 12); 2) An oral rite, i.e. a prayer or an incantation (5 pages, double spaced, due on Friday, Nov. 16).
5. Final Exam.

Graduates:
1. Attendance at all lectures is expected. Students are allowed two unexcused absences. More absences may endanger your grade and can lead to failure.
2. All assigned general and specific secondary readings as well as primary sources are to be read.
3. Each graduate student will present oral summaries and critiques of two readings. These readings will be selected from the readings assigned for the undergraduate abstracts. After the presentation, please submit the lecture you have given (notes, powerpoint, etc.). A sign-up sheet will be passed around.
4. Graduate students will submit a 10-12 page paper. This paper is not primarily a research paper, but explores some issue touched upon in the course.
5. Final Exam.

**Grading:**

*Undergraduate:*
Prepared Attendance and Participation 25%
Abstracts and Analyses 50%
Final 25%

*Graduate:*
Prepared Attendance and Participation 25%
Presentations (two) 25%
Paper (10-12 pages) 25%
Final 25%

**General Comments:**
1. I will be happy to discuss any aspect of the course or your work with you. Please make an appointment or come by during my regular office hours. Justin Huguenin will serve as a TF for this course. He is available to answer your question and to provide help with the assignments and will conduct a review session for the exam. He will also manage the on-line course materials. You may contact him at jmmhug@brandeis.edu for help or to make an appointment.

**Important Notices:**
If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and if you wish to request a reasonable accommodation for this class, please see me immediately. Please keep in mind that reasonable accommodations are not provided retroactively.

Plagiarism of any kind is not tolerated at Brandeis. Educate yourself on the definition of academic plagiarism so that you can avoid it.

Academic Integrity: According to the student handbook, every member of the community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty. A student will not receive credit for work that is not the product of the student’s own effort. Any words or ideas that are not the student’s own must be explicitly attributed to their source. Violations of University policies on academic integrity, described in Section 3 of Rights and Responsibilities, may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, and could end in suspension.
from the University. If you are in doubt about the instruction for any assignment in this course, you must ask for clarification.

Computer use in class is limited to note-taking only. Use for other purposes will result in suspension of the right to use a computer in class for the remainder of the semester.

Success in this 4 credit-hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

**Books to be Acquired**


**Tentative Schedule:**

**Week 1**
First day: Wed., Aug. 29

**Week 2**
No class on Monday, Sept. 3.
Wed., Sept 5
Brandeis Monday on Thursday, Sept. 6

**Week 3**
No class on Monday, Sept. 10
Wed, Sept 12. (1st graduate presentation)
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

**Week 4**
Mon., Sept. 17 (2nd graduate presentation)
No class on Wednesday, Sept. 19
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 5
No class on Monday, Sept. 24
Brandeis Monday on Tuesday, Sept. 25
Wednesday, Sept. 26 (3rd graduate presentation)
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 6
No class on Monday, Oct. 1
Wednesday, Oct. 3 (4th graduate presentation)
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 7
Monday, Oct. 8
Wednesday, Oct. 10
Due on Friday: first undergrad text analysis on a god or demon figure (3 pages).

Week 8
Monday Oct. 15 (5th graduate presentation)
Wednesday, Oct. 17
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 9
Monday, Oct. 22 (6th graduate presentation)
Wednesday, Oct. 24
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 10
Monday, Oct. 29 (7th graduate presentation)
Wednesday Oct. 31
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 11
Monday, Nov. 5 (8th graduate presentation)
Wednesday, Nov. 7
Due on Friday: undergraduate abstracts

Week 12
Monday, Nov. 12 (9th graduate presentation)
Wednesday, Nov. 14 (10th graduate presentation)
Due on Friday: second undergraduate text analysis on an oral rite (5 pages).

Week 13
Monday, Nov. 19
No class on Wednesday Nov. 21 for Thanksgiving break

Week 14
Monday, Nov. 26
Wednesday, Nov. 28
Due on Wednesday: graduate student paper (10-12 pages).

Week 15
Monday, Dec. 3 (11th graduate presentation)
Wednesday, Dec. 5 (12th graduate presentation)

Week 16
Monday, Dec. 10

Course Outline:

Introduction: Reading from selection of magical texts

1. Magic: General
   A. Introduction
      1. Magic and Religion
      2. Definition and Function of Magic
   B. The Magical Experience and View of the World
      1. Holistic Structure (the interconnectedness of humans, society, and nature) vs. Hierarchical Structure or Separate Domains
      2. Sympathetic Magic
         a. Imitative
         b. Contagious
C. The Nature of Ritual and Speech

2. Ancient Mesopotamian Culture and Religion
   A. History
   B. Gods
   C. Temples
   D. Ideology

Ancient Mesopotamian Magic: Survey
3. Magic and Magical Literature
   A. Survey
   B. Types of Documents

4. Magical Ceremonies (Examples)

5. Typology of Magical Activities
   A. Magical Activities, Techniques, and Materials
   B. Oral Rites: Prayers, Incantations, and Spells
   C. Magic and Medicine

6. Evil
   Images, Agencies, and Causes of Evil
      1. Gods
      2. Demons
      3. Personal God
      4. Ghosts and Death
      5. Evil Omens
      6. Curses
      7. Sin
      8. Witches

Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft

Ancient Reflections
8. Theodicy: the Problem of Suffering

**Magic in Other Cultures of Antiquity**
9. Magic in Israel and Judaism
10. Magic in Late Antiquity
Readings by Topic:

Please note: It is my hope that we will cover the first six topics during the first month and that we will then devote the bulk of the semester to the reading of incantations against witchcraft (topic 7). As much as possible, try to coordinate your reading with the class lectures. But I am not unaware of the number of readings assigned for topics 1-6; accordingly, I do not object to your spacing of the reading of the assignments for topics 1-6 over the first two months of the course.

1 A. Introduction


B. The Magical Experience


Frankfort, ed., et al., Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man, Ch. 1 ("Myth and Reality"), pp. 3-27.

C. The Nature of Ritual and Speech

Cunningham, Religion and Magic: Approaches and Theories, "Tambiah" (from Ch. 6: "Symbolic approaches"), pp. 67-71.

Primary sources:

2. **Ancient Mesopotamian Culture and Religion**


Cryer and Thomsen, *Witchcraft and Magic*, pp. 3-23.


**Primary sources:**


*Ancient Mesopotamian Magic: Survey*

3. **Magic and Magical Literature**

A.-B. Description: Survey & Types of Documents


**Primary sources:**

*Required of graduate students; recommended, but not required of all others.*

4. **Magical Ceremonies (Examples)**


5. **Typology of Magical Activities**

A. Magical Activities, Techniques, and Materials


B. Oral Rites: Prayers, Incantations, and Spells


Primary sources:

Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 636-766 (read prayers to 13 deities).

Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 954-1014 (read 13 sections of incantations).

C. Magic and Medicine


Primary sources:


**A. Gods**


**Primary sources:**


**B. Demons**

Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*. Locate and read five entries that treat evil forces.


**Primary sources:**


Foster, *Before the Muses*, Lamaštu: pp. 76, 173-174; Other Demons: pp. 64, 175, 963, 966, 987-989.
C. Personal God

**Primary sources:**

D. Ghosts and Death

**Primary sources:**
Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 731-732b, 990-991.

E. Evil Omens

**Primary sources:**

Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 646b-647.

**F. Curses**

**Primary sources:**


**G. Sin**

**Primary sources:**


**H. Witches**


**Primary sources:**
Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 188, 660-662, 666-667, 673-674b, 720, 729a, 735-737, 743-744a, 996-999.


7. Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft

Witchcraft (Black or Destructive Magic) and a close reading of Maqlû and of selected rituals and oral rites against witchcraft.

Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature, Ch. 14 ("Maqlû: A Schematic Summary"), pp. 287-292. [originally = Pp. 346-351 in Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archaeologie 7.]


**Primary sources:**


Abusch and Schwemer, *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals*, vols. 1 (Ancient Magic and Divination 8/1) and vol. 2 (Ancient Magic and Divination 8/2).

**Theoretical Retrospective**