

# The Eagle and the Snake, or *anzû* and *bašmu*? Another Mythological Dimension in the *Epic of Etana*

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Much of the surviving text of the *Epic of Etana* tells the story of an eagle and a snake. The eagle and snake are extraordinary creatures, and their story abounds with mythological subtext. This paper argues that the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* was amended to include explicit references to the eagle and the snake by the names of their mythological counterparts, *anzû* and *bašmu*. These references occur in two analogous contexts and serve the same narrative purpose: to dehumanize the other when the eagle and the snake seek to do each other harm. The deliberate character of these changes and their symmetry suggest that they are the product of a conscientious scribe with a developed literary sensibility.

## INTRODUCTION

Lamentably fragmentary as it is, the *Epic of Etana* (*āla īširû ultaklilūšu*, according to its late incipit) is an important work of Akkadian literature. It tells the story of Etana, whom the gods choose to exercise kingship and who goes in search of the plant of birth so that he can sire an heir.<sup>1</sup> Much of the surviving text of *Etana* does not, however, deal with Etana at all. Instead, almost the entirety of Tablet 2 of the Neo-Assyrian recension of the epic tells the story of an eagle and a snake. This narrative has extensive mythological qualities,<sup>2</sup> not least of which is the anthropomorphization of the eagle and the snake. These characters are depicted speaking to each other, to their children, to the sun god Šamaš, and to the human Etana. Indeed, the mythical quality of the eagle is further reflected in the fact that it is able to carry Etana up to heaven on its back—this is no ordinary eagle. There are also curious intertextual references to other Mesopotamian myths, notably in the description of the youngest of the eagle's hatchlings as *atar ḥasīsa*.<sup>3</sup> Amid this rich mythological material, I contend that the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* preserves a pair of explicit references to the eagle and the snake by the names of their mythological counterparts, *anzû* and *bašmu*. Although the reference to *anzû* has been widely noted, the reference to *bašmu* has been hiding in plain sight.

## SOURCES FOR THE EAGLE AND THE SNAKE

The *Epic of Etana* is known from two Old Babylonian manuscripts, a number of Middle Assyrian manuscripts, and a larger group of Neo-Assyrian manuscripts from Nineveh.<sup>4</sup> Like

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1. See Selz 1998 for an analysis of the cultural function of *Etana* in its Mesopotamian *Sitz im Leben*.

2. For further consideration of the mythological qualities of the narrative of the eagle and the snake with additional references, see especially Haul 2000: 60–63 and also Selz 1998: 144, n. 52.

3. In ll. 45 and 98 of Tablet 2 of the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana*. *Atar-ḥasīsa* is of course a by-form of the name of the hero of the *Epic of Atra-Ḥasīs*, which tells the story of the survivor of the mythical flood. The use of this epithet for the snake's youngest hatchling has escaped commentary in the major editions of the text of *Etana*.

4. For editions of the various *Etana* manuscripts with relevant further bibliography, see Kinnier Wilson 1985 and 2007, Saporetti 1990, Haul 2000, and Novotny 2001. Of the two Old Babylonian manuscripts, one is from Susa

most literary texts from Nineveh, the Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts are written in Standard Babylonian. The existing manuscripts indicate that the text of *Etana* was copied in tablets of varying length, so that the content of any one tablet of the series could vary depending on its size and layout.<sup>5</sup> Even if the distribution of the text of *Etana* could vary per tablet, there was no such variation in the text itself. Wherever the contents of Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts overlap, there are no meaningful differences in the text they record.<sup>6</sup> To the contrary, the manuscripts by and large mirror each other on a sign for sign basis. All differences are very minor, concerning vowel choice,<sup>7</sup> syllabic versus logographic writings,<sup>8</sup> sign choice,<sup>9</sup> verbal form,<sup>10</sup> the choice of the determinative sign preceding Etana's name,<sup>11</sup> and on two occasions the inclusion or exclusion of a pronominal suffix.<sup>12</sup> There is not a single documented instance in which a word that features in one Neo-Assyrian manuscript does not feature at the corresponding point in another. To the best of our knowledge, the Neo-Assyrian text of *Etana* was fixed and existed in only one recension.

In the manuscripts from all periods, much of the surviving text tells the story of the eagle and the snake. The fundamental plot of this episode is constant through time. The eagle and the snake occupy the same poplar tree (*šarbatu*) in the sanctuary of the god Adad, the eagle living at the top of the tree and the snake at its base. Instead of expending their energy in constant vigilance against each other, the eagle and the snake decide to cooperate. They swear friendship before Šamaš. Whenever the eagle catches an animal, it shares the meat with the

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and the other is of unknown provenance. This latter tablet is usually associated with Larsa and is now in the Pierpont Morgan collection in New York, and thus often called the "Morgan Tablet." The Middle Assyrian manuscripts are all from Aššur, and the Neo-Assyrian manuscripts are all from Nineveh.

5. As discussed in detail in Haul 2000: 163–65. Line 155 of manuscript A records the preceding passage as the end of the third tablet in the *Etana* series, whereas manuscript B records the same passage as the conclusion of the second tablet of the series.

6. This is especially noticeable in the score of the text provided in Novotny 2001: 27–41.

7. Particularly concerning /e/ and /i/. See the variants *šá-ma-me* and *šá-ma-mi* in manuscripts F and G for l. 93 of Tablet 2; *ri-me* and *ri-mi* in manuscripts B<sub>2</sub> and F for l. 104 of Tablet 2; and *at-be-ma* and *at-bi-ma* in manuscripts K and M for l. 112 of Tablet 3. See also the variants *qu-ra-du* and *qu-ra-di* in manuscripts F and G for l. 88 of Tablet 2.

8. In Tablet 2, compare KA-*šu* and *pa-a-šu* for l. 96 in manuscripts B<sub>2</sub> and F; KA-*šu* and *pi-i-šu* for l. 144 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G; and KA-*šu* and *pi-i-šu* for l. 154 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and A. Compare also KI-*tum* and *er-še-t[um]* for l. 136 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G; KUR-*a* and *šá-da-a* for l. 145 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G; and Tl<sub>8</sub>.MUŠEN and *e-ru-ú* for l. 147 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G. Finally, for the pseudo-logograms *ana* and *ina* compare *ina* and *i-na* for l. 139 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G, and *ana* and *a-na* for l. 154 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and A. In l. 114 of Tablet 3, compare *ana* and *a-na* in manuscripts K and M.

9. In Tablet 2, compare *e-re-bi-šú* and *[e-r]e-bi-šu* for l. 111 in manuscripts B<sub>2</sub> and F; *ta-kul* and *[ta]-ku-ul* for l. 131 in manuscripts B<sub>3</sub> and G; *a-ma-tu* and *[a-m]a-tum* for l. 101 in manuscripts B<sub>2</sub> and G; and *i-pu-šá-am-ma* and *i-pu-šam-ma* for l. 96, with the former featuring in manuscripts B<sub>2</sub> and F and the latter in manuscript G. In Tablet 3, the form *tam-tum* appears in ll. 33 and 37 in manuscripts M and O, while *tam-tu* features in manuscript N. In l. 35, manuscript M has *ma-a-tum* where N has *ma-a-tu*.

10. In Tablet 2, compare *šu-ub-ta it-ta-di* and *šu-ub-ta id-di* for l. 92 in manuscripts F and G, as well as the use of the ventive in l. 144, where manuscript B<sub>3</sub> has *i-pu-uš-ma* and G has *i-pu-šam-ma*. In l. 153, manuscript A has *uš-ta-qa-áš-š[u]*, while manuscript B<sub>3</sub> has *ul-ta-qa-á[š-šu]*, with /l/ taking the place of /š/ before the dental /t/. In Tablet 3, manuscripts M and O have *it-tur* for l. 36 while manuscript N has *it-tu-ru*.

11. In l. 144 of Tablet 2, manuscript B<sub>3</sub> refers to Etana with the divine determinative (<sup>d</sup>*et-na-na*), whereas manuscript G instead has the *Personenkeil* (<sup>m</sup>*et-na-na*).

12. In l. 86 of Tablet 2, manuscript F has *bu-qu-un-šu-ma i-di-šú*, with the pronominal suffix *-šu* added to both verbs. Manuscript G only has the pronominal suffix *-šu* on the first of the two verbs: *bu-qu-un-šú-ma id-di*. There are also different sign choices, with G reproducing *šú* and *id-di* where F has *šu* and *i-di*. In l. 140 of Tablet 2, manuscript B<sub>3</sub> has *be-lum* without a pronominal suffix, while manuscript G has *be-li* with the first person singular pronominal suffix.

snake; whenever the snake catches an animal, it shares the meat with the eagle.<sup>13</sup> Both animals further distribute this bounty to their respective broods. The cooperation between the eagle and the snake comes to a dramatic end when the eagle's chicks mature. At that point, the eagle plots to eat the snake's children. Although it is counseled against this by one of its fledglings,<sup>14</sup> the eagle swoops down while the snake is out hunting and eats its young. When the snake returns and discovers what has happened, it is overcome with grief.<sup>15</sup> The snake remonstrates with the god Šamaš, before whom the oath of friendship had been sworn. The eagle has violated its oath, declares the snake, and it must be punished for its foul deed. Šamaš agrees, and the plot moves on from there to the eagle's punishment and its subsequent rescue by Etana.

Where the surviving text of the various *Etana* manuscripts overlaps, there is substantial congruity across time. This congruity is such that many passages of the Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian manuscripts are reiterated nigh verbatim in their Neo-Assyrian counterparts. Given the stability of the *Etana* text tradition, any differences between the manuscripts are deserving of heightened attention. One of these differences is the inclusion in the Neo-Assyrian recension of references to *anzû* and—if the present argument is correct—to *bašmu*, despite their absence from the Old Babylonian manuscripts that preserve parallel passages.

The eagle and the snake of *Etana* are clearly conceived of as an eagle and a snake rather than as *anzû* and *bašmu*. In the Old Babylonian manuscript from Susa, the eagle is identified by its Akkadian equivalent *erû* written out syllabically. The snake is identified by the logogram MUŠ, which represents *šēru*, the Akkadian word for snake. In the Old Babylonian Morgan Tablet, *šēru* is written out syllabically, so that there is no doubt about the intended value of the logogram MUŠ.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian manuscripts refrain from syllabic spellings and with a single exception represent the eagle and the snake by the logograms TI<sub>8</sub><sup>MUŠEN</sup> (*erû*)<sup>17</sup> and MUŠ (*šēru*). TI<sub>8</sub><sup>MUŠEN</sup> is a perfectly conventional logographic value for eagle, so that there is again no doubt about the intended referent.

#### ENTER ANZÛ

Lines 23'–24' of the Old Babylonian Susa Tablet of *Etana* preserve part of the snake's indictment of the eagle.<sup>18</sup> In these lines, the snake denounces the eagle to Šamaš as:

*ēpiš lemu[tti u a]nzilli mukil lem[utt]i ana ibrišu*  
the perpetrator of evil and abomination, who harbored evil against its comrade.

The analogous passage in the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* is amended at one point.<sup>19</sup> There, the snake denounces the eagle instead as:

13. In the Old Babylonian Susa Tablet only the snake is depicted as hunting, with the eagle and its young feeding off of the catch. As pointed out by Foster 2005: 534–35, this magnifies the contrast between the actions of the snake and those of the eagle.

14. The smallest one, *atmu šēru atar-ḥasīsa* (“the youngest hatchling, exceedingly wise”).

15. On grieving the loss of children in ancient Mesopotamia, see Valk 2016.

16. See Haul 2000: 106–15 for editions of the Susa Tablet and the Morgan Tablet, including the relevant references to the eagle and the snake.

17. The single exception occurs in manuscript G of the Neo-Assyrian recension. In l. 147 of Tablet 2, the manuscript reproduces the form *e-ru-û*, the only surviving passage in the manuscript in which the name of the eagle appears.

18. Following the line numbering in Haul 2000: 112.

19. This is preserved in line 24 of manuscript F (K 2527 + K 5299), or l. 72 of Tablet 2.

*ēpiš lemutti anzû mukîl* [*lemutti ana ibrišu*]

the evildoer, the *anzû* who harbored evil against its comrade.<sup>20</sup>

This change alters the character of the snake's complaint: the snake is not merely stating that the eagle is an evildoer, but identifying the eagle explicitly with the *anzû*-bird, the eagle's mythological counterpart.<sup>21</sup>

The *anzû* is very well attested in Mesopotamian mythology,<sup>22</sup> including in its own epic where the bird is entrusted by the god Enlil with the task of guarding the tablet of destinies but instead betrays Enlil's trust and steals the tablet.<sup>23</sup> All of the gods come together to defeat wicked *anzû*, who is eventually slain by Ninurta, an act that enables the restoration of the divine order. The use of *anzû* in a comparative sense is likewise well attested, often demonstrating the wickedness of whatever is being likened to the *anzû*.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, by referring to the eagle as *anzû*, the snake is transposing this entire mythological frame of reference onto it. This rhetorical ploy equates the eagle's bad character and monstrous deeds with those of *anzû*. Like *anzû*, the eagle is a wicked creature deserving of punishment at the hands of the gods, which is precisely what the snake demands of Šamaš.

By itself, the snake's use of the epithet *anzû* to refer to the eagle can be understood as a scribal misrepresentation of the word *anzilli* that features in the analogous line of the Old Babylonian Susa Tablet.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, good cause to regard this change as a deliberate scribal emendation—even beyond the fact that the change serves a clear rhetorical purpose and does not create textual difficulties of any kind. The term *anzilla* features at two other points in the Neo-Assyrian manuscripts, so that no argument can be made that it is the lectio difficilior in the passage where it is amended to *anzû*. In the first instance, transgressing the oath of friendship is described as *anz[illa] ša ilāni* ("an abomination of the gods").<sup>26</sup> In the second instance, Šamaš says to the eagle that *anzilla ša ilāni asakku tākul* ("you committed an abomination of the gods, a forbidden deed").<sup>27</sup> This second instance is partially preserved in the parallel passage from the Old Babylonian Morgan Tablet, which renders *anzillam ša i[lī ...]* ("an abomination of the g[ods ...]").<sup>28</sup>

Here, the Neo-Assyrian recension and its Old Babylonian forebear mirror each other precisely, with the scribe of the former having no problem rendering the Old Babylonian *anzillam* with fidelity. Given that the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* can reproduce *anzilli* without difficulty, including at the precise moment that its Old Babylonian predecessor does, the deviation from such fidelity at only one point merits attention. This is all the more true because the change from *anzilli* to *anzû* makes good textual sense. *Anzû* is no accident.

20. The ending of the line is reconstructed on the basis of the Old Babylonian Susa Tablet.

21. Dalley 1989: 193 in fact translates the first half of this line as "As criminal as Anzu," which highlights the comparative character of the reference to *anzû*.

22. For a concise overview, see the entry "Imdugud" in Black and Green 1992: 107–8. See Wiggermann 1992: 159–63 and Haul 2000: 57–60 for fuller accounts.

23. For an edition of this epic with an extended introduction, see Annus 2001.

24. For further references to the *anzû* as a monstrous creature in comparisons and descriptions, see section *b* of the entry for *anzû* in CAD A/2: 154–55.

25. As suggested by the note to l. 65 in Saporetti 1990: 69. Worthington 2012: 112 and *passim* points out that it is often unclear whether a textual emendation was deliberate or the result of any of a range of scribal errors.

26. This is preserved in manuscript B<sub>3</sub> (the Berkshire fragment, first edited in Jastrow 1909–10, which reproduces a photograph), or l. 13 of Tablet 2.

27. This is preserved in manuscript B<sub>3</sub>, or l. 131 of Tablet 2.

28. Line 22' according to the edition of Haul 2000: 112.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT -MI

The deliberate character of the change from *anzilli* to *anzû* can serve to clarify a textual curiosity in one passage of the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana*. There, the text relates that when the eagle decided to eat the snake's young, it declared:

*mārī MUŠ-mi lūkulu anāku : MUŠ-mi lib-b[a...]*  
I shall eat the MUŠ-*mi*'s children: the MUŠ-*mi* in ...<sup>29</sup>

The traditional approach has been to read MUŠ here in the same way that it is read elsewhere in all Old Babylonian, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts: as *šēru* (snake). The -*mi* ending is understood as the enclitic particle marking direct speech.<sup>30</sup> This reading makes sense in light of the preceding line, which indeed indicates that the words here represent the eagle's direct speech.<sup>31</sup>

Although this reading is semantically sound, there are contextual reasons for regarding it as an "oddity of sense"<sup>32</sup> of the kind that Martin Worthington classifies under "wider problems of compositional logic and consistency."<sup>33</sup> The inconsistency here is in the usage of the particle -*mi*. Nowhere else in any Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscript is this particle attested.<sup>34</sup> This is so despite the fact that much of the surviving text from these manuscripts records direct speech, there being seventeen such instances in Tablet 2 alone and considerably more across all tablets. Many of these instances are preserved in multiple manuscripts, always without the particle -*mi*. The -*mi* is likewise absent from the analogous line in the Old Babylonian Susa Tablet.<sup>35</sup> If the -*mi* particle is never used to mark direct speech elsewhere in the Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts, then why would it be used here and only here? There is nothing about the passage itself or the text that precedes and follows it that marks it out as different. It is also curious that the sign sequence MUŠ-*mi* is repeated twice in the passage,

29. This passage is preserved in manuscript B<sub>2</sub> (the so-called Marsh tablet, first edited in Jastrow 1898, which reproduces a photograph), and constitutes lines 41–42 of Tablet 2. It should be noted that Novotny's lines 41–42 form a single line in the manuscript.

30. The reading of -*mi* as the particle of direct speech can be found in n. 2 in Langdon 1932: 18, n. 42 in Kinnier Wilson 1985: 130, and n. 522 in Haul 2000: 174. On this particle, see the extended treatment of Wasserman 2012: chap. 9 with a discussion of the history of scholarship and references. See also the reviews of Cohen 2014, de Ridder 2014, and Worthington 2017, all three of which reflect on and add to Wasserman's treatment of -*mi*.

31. The preceding line reads *erû pīšu īpušma izakkar a[na mārīšu]* (the eagle spoke, saying [to its children]). Equivalent lines reporting direct speech feature many times in the text.

32. To borrow the felicitous phrase from Worthington 2012: §2.2.1.3 (pp. 47–51).

33. Worthington 2012: 47.

34. The only other place in which the -*mi* particle might conceivably be reconstructed is l. 112 of Tablet 2. This line is poorly preserved, but manuscript B possibly features the sign sequence *ki-i-mi*. This sign sequence can be interpreted as the word *kī* followed by -*mi*. The sign sequence does not, however, appear in the copy of the tablet in the original publication by Jastrow 1898, and neither is it readily discernible in the photograph of the tablet provided by Jastrow. The poor state of preservation of the line also prevents any firm inference from context about what the sign sequence is or what it is intended to designate. Fresh collation of the tablet might settle the matter; if not, the content of the line will have to remain an open question until further evidence emerges.

35. Line 18 according to the edition of Haul 2000: 108, which reads *u mārū MUŠ (šērim) lūku[l anāku]* ("and I shall eat the snake's children"). Although the -*mi* particle is absent here, it does appear to feature as part of the same episode in the Susa Tablet. The first half of l. 15 preserves the signs *ma-ru-ū-a-mi*. The second half of the line is broken, but there is space following the surviving signs, so that they should be regarded as a single word with affixes: *mārīyami* ("my children") with the enclitic particle -*mi*. The -*mi* of the Susa Tablet might thus mark the same (expanded) passage of speech as the -*mi* of Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscript B. This would, however, be the only known instance of the -*mi* particle in the Old Babylonian manuscripts.

which has drawn attention from scholars and elicited the argument that the second *-mi* is a scribal error.<sup>36</sup> It is odd that there is a *-mi* at all, and doubly odd that there are two of them.

Another possibility is that the *-mi* in this passage is not merely marking direct speech. Nathan Wasserman argues on the basis of Old Babylonian evidence that “what all of the examples of *-mi* in literary texts have in common is that they break, or alternate with, the flow of narrative discourse by creating a sudden turn, a direct address to a person (human or divine) who is present in the situation.”<sup>37</sup> This is certainly what is happening in our example, as the eagle turns to its children and addresses them directly. But this too is not unique: many of the instances of direct speech in *Etana* are not semantically or syntactically distinguishable from the passage featuring *-mi*. There is therefore no compelling reason why *-mi* should feature in one instance and not in the others. This is starkest in ll. 96 and 97 of Tablet 2, the pattern of which closely resembles that of the passage featuring *-mi*:

Tablet 2: 40–41

(40) *erū pāšu ipušma izakkar a[na mārīšu]* (41) *mārī MUŠ-mi lūkulu anāku MUŠ-mi lib-b[a...]*

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to its children: “I shall eat the MUŠ-*mi*’s children! The MUŠ-*mi* i[n...].”

Tablet 2: 96–97

(96) *erū pāšu ipušamma izakkara ana mārīšu* (97) *alkānimma i nīridma šīr rīmi annē i nīkula nīnu*

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to its children: “Come, let us go down and let us eat the flesh of this wild bull!”

Lines 40 and 96 both introduce the eagle’s direct speech to its children using the same formula, the only difference being the appearance of the ventive on the verb *īpuš* in l. 96.<sup>38</sup> In the direct speech that follows in ll. 41 and 97, the eagle each time addresses its children in the precativ form of the verb *akālu* (to eat)—once in the first person singular and once in the first person plural. Although these two pairs of lines offer parallel constructions involving the same actor speaking to the same audience using the same verb in the same form, *-mi* appears only in the earlier passage. If *-mi* has a grammatical function, then it is not obvious what it might be that requires it in one passage but not in any others. All grammatical readings of *-mi* in this context suffer from this same basic problem.<sup>39</sup>

36. The note to l. 42 in Kinnier Wilson 1985: 130 argues that the second *-mi* is an erasure despite its clear visibility in the photograph of the tablet. Kinnier Wilson states that “one could question whether the particle is really required a second time in the speech, and following the previous MUŠ-*mi* which occurs earlier in the line the error would be easily explainable.” Note 522 in Haul 2000: 174 observes the duplication of the *-mi* particle in the line and refers back to Kinnier Wilson’s argument. The copy of the tablet in Saporetti 1990: Plate 1 reproduces the second *-mi* more faintly than the first.

37. Wasserman 2012: 188.

38. It should be noted that although both pairs of lines are preserved in the same manuscript (B), most of l. 97 does not survive in that manuscript and is reconstructed from other manuscripts. This means that it is unclear if there was a *-mi* in l. 97 of manuscript B. It is nevertheless possible to state with some confidence that there was not: the relevant passage is preserved in manuscripts F and G, where it features without *-mi*, and where the signs survive, manuscript B agrees in full with F and G at this point. This is especially telling for the verb *īpušam* in l. 96, as manuscripts B, F, and G all include the ventive. By contrast, manuscript B—the only exemplar for l. 40—has *īpuš* without the ventive. There thus appears to be harmony between the manuscripts even when it concerns morphemes like the ventive or, one infers, *-mi*.

39. Cohen 2014: 132–34 critiques Wasserman’s model for the use of *-mi* in literary texts and revisits the argument that the particle can serve as a particle of focus. If we read *-mi* as the particle of focus in our passage, it still remains unclear why the particle should appear there but not elsewhere.



But what else could the *-mi* be? Instead of the particle of direct speech, I suggest that *-mi* should be read as a phonetic complement to MUŠ.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the particle of direct speech, phonetic complements are plentiful in the Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts.<sup>41</sup> This is true of the sign *mi* itself, which appears as a phonetic complement for UD in l. 128—preserved in the same manuscript B that features MUŠ-*mi* no less.<sup>42</sup> If *-mi* is a phonetic complement, then MUŠ must represent not *šēru*, but an analogous noun with final consonant /m/. There is a strong candidate for precisely such a noun, namely the mythological serpent *bašmu*.<sup>43</sup> In Tablet 14 of the lexical list Ura = *hubullu*, the term *bašmu* is attested among the creatures whose names begin with the sign MUŠ.<sup>44</sup> It is also the only relevant term with a final consonant /m/.

#### ENTER BAŠMU

Like *anzû*, *bašmu* is a mythical creature associated with efforts to subvert the divine dispensation.<sup>45</sup> The monstrous character of *bašmu* and its alignment with the forces of chaos is apparent in a number of mythological and mythologically charged texts.<sup>46</sup> In the Babylonian epic of creation *Enūma eliš*, the *bašmu* features as one of the monsters spawned by Tiamat.<sup>47</sup> *Bašmu* likewise features with *anzû* among the mythical creatures at the edges of the world in the so-called Babylonian *Mappa Mundi*.<sup>48</sup> In the literary fragment KAR 6,<sup>49</sup> sometimes referred to as the “Bašmu myth,”<sup>50</sup> *bašmu* is described as a chaos-serpent of immense proportions. This *bašmu* consumes all living things, including humans, and the gods need to intervene to stop it. The plotline here is remarkably similar to that of the *Anzû* epic, involving a monstrous creature undoing the divine order before being eliminated by a god.<sup>51</sup> There is,

40. It is also possible to read MUŠ-*mi* as the composite logogram MUŠ.GE<sub>6</sub>—*šēr mūši* (“snake of the night”). This reading is, however, intrusive in the present context and lacks parallels.

41. Limiting ourselves only to Tablet 2, and ignoring the many syllabic suffixes to logograms, there remain numerous examples of phonetic complements in the Neo-Assyrian *Etana* manuscripts. In manuscript B, we find KI-*tim* (*eršetim*) in l. 15, MU-*ár* (*izakkar*) in l. 46, UD-*me* (*ūme*) in l. 53, UD-*mi* (*ūmī*) in l. 128, and KUR-*a* (*šadā*) in l. 145. Compare also the proper name <sup>a</sup>UDU-*ši* (*šamši*) in l. 86 of manuscript G, which presumably also features in l. 134 of the same manuscript. These are only some of the instances in which phonetic complements are used.

42. The passage reads UD-*mi da-ru-ú-ti* (*ūmī dārūti*).

43. On the mythological nature of *bašmu*, see, for instance, the judgment of Lambert 2013: 472 in his comment on l. I 141 of *Enūma eliš* that “the *bašmu* is only mythological.”

44. The first 46 entries of Tablet 14 of the lexical series Ura = *hubullu* treat terms for animals beginning with the sign MUŠ. Most of these animals represent varieties of snake, including some that are at least partially mythological in character. The term *bašmu* is represented by three logographic variants in entries 6–8. For an edition of the MUŠ entries in Ura = *hubullu*, see Landsberger 1962: 7–10.

45. See Wiggermann 1992: 166–68 for a discussion of *bašmu*, and for the argument that the Akkadian *bašmu* represents two distinct Sumerian terms, namely UŠUM and MUŠ.ŠĀ.TÛR (both of which are listed under *bašmu* in Ura = *hubullu*). Of the two, it is UŠUM that is the chaos-serpent, and Wiggermann argues that the Sumerian UŠUM is a loanword from the Akkadian *wašm-*.

46. For an overview, see Haul 2000: 54–56.

47. *Enūma eliš* I 141, II 27, and III 31. See Lambert 2013 for an edition and translation of the text, as well as a commentary.

48. Line 5 of the obverse of BM 92687, edited in Horowitz 1998: chap. 2 with commentary. See Horowitz 1998: 33–36 for his notes on the passage including comments on *bašmu* and *anzû*.

49. Edited in Ebeling 1916: 106–8, translated partially in both King 1918: 117–18 and Heidel 1951: 143, and translated fully into English in Foster 2005: 579–80.

50. For instance, in Wiggermann 1992: 154 and in Haul 2000: 55.

51. This similarity is also noted by Foster 2005: 579.

indeed, a whole set of texts involving the defeat of a chaos monster by a divine figure, in which the role of chaos monster can be occupied either by an *anzû*- or *bašmu*-like creature.<sup>52</sup>

The supernatural character of *bašmu* is further apparent in the term's other role as the name of a divine figure.<sup>53</sup> Both usages preserve the tenor of the term *bašmu* as something fearsome and otherworldly. This is reflected in the comparative use of *bašmu* in the *Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince*, in which the scepter of the netherworld deity Nergal is described as *kīma bašme puluḫtu malû* ("as full of fearsomeness as *bašmu*").<sup>54</sup> Another example of such comparative usage can be found in the fragmentary Old Babylonian text *Naram-Sîn and the Lord of Apišal*, in which the fearsome character of Naram-Sîn is communicated by identifying parts of him with *bašmu* and *anzû*: *bašmummi pīka anzû šuprāka* ("your mouth is *bašmu*, your nails are *anzû*").<sup>55</sup>

Although *bašmu* is generally written out either syllabically or logographically (principally as MUŠ.ŠĀ.TÛR),<sup>56</sup> the relationship between the sign MUŠ and the term *bašmu* surfaces in numerous contexts. In KAR 6, for instance, the sign MUŠ appears to be followed by *bašmu* written out syllabically, so that MUŠ functions as a determinative.<sup>57</sup> This indicates a clear understanding of *bašmu* as a variety of MUŠ. The composition *šēru šikinšu* ("the snake, its form") likewise represents an understanding of *bašmu* as a variety of MUŠ. The text lists various snakes represented by the sign MUŠ, with every entry beginning with the formula "if the form of the MUŠ is." This introductory statement is followed by a description of features of the snake. Once the snake has been described, the format specifies the name for the kind of MUŠ involved. This is done using the formula "the MUŠ is X (MUŠ.BI X)," where X is the name for the creature that fits the description. Based on the surviving descriptions of snakes in *šēru šikinšu*, at least one of them is the *bašmu*, though the portion of the text that would preserve the name is broken.<sup>58</sup> In any case, the understanding of *bašmu* as a distinct kind of MUŠ in *šēru šikinšu* is unmistakable.

The identification of the sign MUŠ with *bašmu* in scribal usage can be discerned in some snake incantations. One of these incantations is the Old Babylonian text CBS 7005, here reproduced in full:<sup>59</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*šuttuḫ lānam* <sup>2</sup>*damiq zumram* <sup>3</sup>*sumkīnušu sumkīn gišimmarim* <sup>4</sup>*ina šubtim irabbiš šēru*(MUŠ)  
<sup>5</sup>*ina šuppātim irabbiš bašmu* <sup>6</sup>*ša bašmim šitta* <sup>7</sup>*qaqqadātušuma* <sup>8</sup>*lišānāšu* <sup>9</sup>*par'ullū* <sup>10</sup>*amḥaš parkulla* <sup>11</sup>*u parakulla* <sup>12</sup>*šammanam šēri qištim* <sup>13</sup>*šubādām šēri lā šiptim* <sup>14</sup>*šēri*  
<sup>15</sup>*karānim ša itti wāšipīšu* <sup>15</sup>*imtaḥšu*

52. See Pongratz-Leisten 2015: 233–38 for a fuller consideration of the combat myth and its variant incorporation of either *anzû* or a chaos-serpent.

53. In tablet v 278 of the lexical series *An = Anum*, *bašmu* is identified as the sukkal of Tišpak; see also Wiggermann 1997: 39.

54. Line r.15 in SAA 3 32 (p. 74).

55. Column v 3 in Westenholz 1997: 182.

56. For *bašmu*, Ura = *hubullu* provides the logographic readings MUŠ.ŠĀ.TÛR, MUŠ.GAL.BÛR(UŠUMGAL), and MUŠ.A.AB.BA. For more on the logographic writing MUŠ.ŠĀ.TÛR, see entry 585 in Borger 2004: 377. For syllabic writings and further logographic attestations, see the entry for *bašmu* in CAD B: 141–42 and in AHw I: 112.

57. KAR 6 l. 21 reads *i-na A.AB.BA ib-ba-ni MUŠ ba-[aš-mu]* ("in the ocean the *ba[šmu]*-serpent was formed"). See Ebeling 1916: 106–8. The reconstruction of *bašmu* in this passage follows from the familiarity of the term, its association with the sea (MUŠ.A.AB.BA in Ura = *hubullu*), and the lack of other viable candidates.

58. This text survives in a single manuscript edited in Mirelman 2015 (K.4206+). Lines 16–20 (of the reverse, as identified by Mirelman) preserve the entries that relate to *bašmu*. See Mirelman's notes to these lines on p. 180 for more on their association with *bašmu*.

59. Edited as Text 5 in Finkel 1999: 223–26.



Elongated of form, handsome in body, its detritus is the detritus of the date-palm: in the dwelling lurks the snake, in the rushes lurks the *bašmu*! The *bašmu*: two are its heads, seven are its tongues, seven are the *par'ullus* of its neck. I smote the *parkulla* and the *parakulla*, the forest-snake *šammānum*, the *šubādum*, the snake that cannot be conjured, the snake of the vine that battled its exorcist!

This incantation has a fourfold structure: 1) ll. 1–3 offer a flattering description of a snake (MUŠ), 2) ll. 4–5 are a couplet that works to change the subject of the incantation from the snake to the *bašmu*, 3) ll. 6–9 describe the monstrous nature of the *bašmu*, and 4) ll. 10–15 enumerate the various kinds of snake that the exorcist's spell is effective against. The rhetorical centerpiece of the incantation is the couplet identifying the MUŠ with *bašmu*:

(4) *ina šubtim irabbiš šēru*(MUŠ) (5) *ina šuppātim irabbiš bašmu*  
in the dwelling lurks the snake, in the rushes lurks the *bašmu*.

This couplet reproduces the same line word for word, changing only the subject from MUŠ to *bašmu* and the subject's location from the dwelling to the rushes.<sup>60</sup> A malicious snake that causes harm—and thus requires the intervention of the incantation—is here identified with the mythological *bašmu*. The shift from an ordinary snake to a vicious *bašmu* is amplified by the juxtaposition of the preceding flattering description of the snake with the subsequent description of the monstrosity of the *bašmu*, with its two heads, seven tongues, and the seven *par'ullus* of its neck.<sup>61</sup> The contrast is also intensified in the couplet by changing the creature's location from the domestic realm (the dwelling) to the realm of chaos outside (the rushes). Identifying the snake with *bašmu* transposes the monstrous features of the *bašmu* onto the otherwise ordinary snake. The exorcist's battle against the snake thus reenacts the cosmic battle between the forces of order and those of chaos, with the exorcist starring in the role of the gods and the malicious snake in the role of the chaos-serpent *bašmu*. For the purposes of the incantation, an ordinary snake is a *šēru*, but a malicious snake is a *bašmu*.

The same rhetorical turn is at work in the duplicated snake incantations IM 51292 and IM 51328, which begin with the words *ašbat pī šērī kalīma u kursiddam* ("I seized the mouths of all snakes, even the *kuršindu* snake").<sup>62</sup> The incantations proceed to describe numerous kinds of snakes. These snakes are identified collectively with *bašmu* in a couplet that is parallel to that of ll. 4 and 5 of CBS 7005, in which the lurking snake is replaced by the lurking *bašmu*. As in CBS 7005, the *bašmu* is then described as a monstrous creature, with six mouths, seven tongues, and other frightful characteristics, once again transposing the monstrosity of the *bašmu* onto the malicious snake. The purpose of this structure is the same as that of CBS 7005: by identifying a harmful snake with the monstrous *bašmu*, the incantation reenacts the battle between order and chaos and invokes the forces of the divine realm against the snake.

Despite the strong semantic association between *bašmu* and the sign MUŠ across different kinds of texts, it does not necessarily follow that a scribe would recognize that the logogram MUŠ was intended to represent *bašmu* in any given context. It also does not necessarily follow that a scribe could freely use the sign MUŠ to represent *bašmu*. In one last group of texts, however, it appears that the sign MUŠ could be read straightforwardly as *bašmu*. Astrological and astronomical texts use the sign sequence <sup>mul</sup> (d)MUŠ to represent the constellation Hydra. In one Old Babylonian prayer, this constellation is likely represented syllabically as

60. The poetic effect is heightened by the alliteration and broader phonetic similarity of the Akkadian words for dwelling and rushes, *šubtim* and *šuppātim*.

61. The precise meaning of *par'ullu ša kišādi* is unclear.

62. Line 1 in IM 51292 and IM 51328, edited in Finkel 1999: 226–27.

*ba-aš-mu-um*.<sup>63</sup> Figurative evidence from the first millennium BCE in turn suggests that the sign MUŠ in astrological and astronomical contexts was indeed read simply as *bašmu* at that time, which is broadly contemporary with the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana*.<sup>64</sup>

If MUŠ could represent *bašmu* in astrological and astronomical texts, it is not a huge leap to imagine that scribes might recognize MUŠ as *bašmu* in other kinds of texts, too—perhaps not as the default reading, but certainly as a secondary or tertiary possibility. It is also conceivable, even if there is no hard evidence for it, that the slippage between MUŠ and *bašmu* was more pervasive than the writing preferences of cuneiform scribes allow us to discern. As we have seen, the association between MUŠ and *bašmu* is longstanding and apparent in all sorts of texts. The use of *-mi* as a phonetic complement in *Etana* would serve to jolt the reader into recognizing the word *bašmi* when stumbling upon the sign sequence MUŠ-*mi*.

There is sufficient justification to consider reading the sign sequence MUŠ-*mi* in Tablet 2 of the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* as *bašmu* in the genitive case. This resolves the problem of the curious *-mi* and renders the following statement by the eagle:

*mārī bašmi lūkulu anāku: bašmi lib-b[a ...]*

I shall eat the *bašmu*'s children: the *bašmu* in ...

Regarded in isolation, this hardly seems like an improvement at all: why the abrupt change from snake to *bašmu*? Considered in context, however, this change makes perfect sense and does away with an outstanding oddity in the text. In this passage, the eagle is declaring its intention to betray the snake's friendship by eating its children. The perfidious character of this intention is highlighted directly beforehand by the narrator's use of the term *rū'ūšu* ("its friend") to describe the snake. By thinking of and referring to the snake as *bašmu*, the eagle is effectively dehumanizing it, portraying it as a monstrous other. The eagle is also invoking the mythological framework that calls for the extirpation of *bašmu*, justifying the violence that the eagle is planning to visit upon its erstwhile companion. The eagle doesn't say "I will eat the young of my friend the snake," but "I will eat the young of that *bašmu*." This makes the eagle's subsequent actions more palatable—to itself, at least.

The reading *bašmu* is bolstered by the unambiguous emendation of *anzilla* to *anzû* discussed above. In the Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana*, the snake is made to refer to the eagle as *anzû* when it means the eagle harm. Analogously, the eagle is made to refer to the snake as *bašmu* when it means the snake harm. Both changes are unique to the Neo-Assyrian recension, indicating a mindful pair of emendations to the text. The purposeful character of these changes is reflected in the fact that they appear at the only two points in the narrative where the eagle and the snake verbalize negative intentions toward each other. The changes are thus contextually sound and textually consistent.

## CONCLUSION

At the heart of the *Epic of Etana* is the story of the eagle and the snake. Despite their mutual oath of friendship, these creatures become entangled in conflict. The Neo-Assyrian recension of *Etana* changes the inherited text in numerous ways. One of these changes concerns the two known moments when the eagle and the snake express their intention to do each other harm. In both passages, a scribe appears to have made a conscious decision to

63. See l. 20 of the text edited in von Soden 1936: 306.

64. Lambert 1986: 793 and Wiggermann 1993–1997: §6 (461–62). Lambert and Wiggermann reach the conclusion that MUŠ can represent *bašmu* based in large measure on the figurative representation of the constellation in Weidner 1967: pls. IX–X. See also Wiggermann 1997: 34–35 and n. 14.

have the eagle and the snake impugn each other by referring to the other by the name of their mythological counterparts, *anzû* and *bašmu*. When the eagle plots evil against the snake, it speaks of the snake as a malicious *bašmu*; when the snake demands that the eagle be punished, it speaks of it as a duplicitous *anzû*. These changes are restricted to this context alone. The symmetry of the changes suggests the work of a conscientious scribe in command not only of narrative and plotline, but also of the rich mythological material on which the story of the eagle and the snake rests. It further suggests a scribe familiar with the timeless practice of dehumanizing the other to facilitate the perpetration of violence.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AHw I	Wolfram von Soden, <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , Band I: A–L (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1965).
CAD A/2	A. Leo Oppenheim et al., eds., <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> , vol. 1: A, pt. II (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1968).
CAD B	A. Leo Oppenheim et al., eds., <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> , vol. 2: B (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1965).
KAR	Erich Ebeling, <i>Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts</i> , erster Band (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1919).
RIA 8	Dietz Otto Edzard, ed., <i>Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie</i> , Band 8 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1993–1997).
SAA 3	Alasdair Livingstone, <i>Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea</i> (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1989).

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