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UDK: 2-167.62(358)(09)

Review article

## THE DEMONIC SEVEN IN THREE MESOPOTAMIAN SOURCES

### *Abstract*

*The text offers a preliminary overview of three instances of Mesopotamian sources from the magico-medical and literary sphere, in which the Seven demons (the Seven, Sebetu/Sibitti) are mentioned: some of the incantations for the exorcism of evil demons from the Udug-Hul incantations series; the Story of Gilgamesh and Huwawa (A and B); and Erra and Ishum (or the Poem of Erra/Erra). The text does not make an attempt to answer the question on whether these instances are really references to the same group of demonic Seven, for the Mesopotamian beliefs in demons span millennia, and different religious and cultural-political contexts, and there are various appearances of seven demons, but also of heroes and protectors. The ambivalence that appears in the conception of the Seven is shown through the different actions and roles of the demons in the incantations, as harbingers of disease and troubles; the seven heroes-protectors, sent by the deity in order to help Gilgamesh in his journey to the Cedar Forest (the Land of the living); and the seven servants, the weapons of Erra, who influence him to go on a raging chaotic campaign of violence and provoke the destruction of the world. Considering the decade's long neglect in these areas, both of the beliefs in the evil incarnate, and the precious abundance of sources from the Mesopotamian culture, the goal of this text is to offer some introductory questions from these topics for the Macedonian public.*

**Key words:** *demons, Seven, incantations, Gilgamesh, Erra*

### **The seven demons from the *Udug-hul* incantations**

The beliefs in the existence of demons and in their evil and nefarious activities are versatile and wide-spread through sources from Mesopotamia. Demons appear during different periods and cultural contexts, they are dominantly evil, but sometimes they fulfil useful roles, which means that a certain dose of ambivalence is associated with the demonic. There are different types of (groups of) demons, whose characteristics are mainly vague: while it is known (or rather, believed) how they are acting (in order to be properly precautious, or to suitably intervene against), it is rarely known what they are like. A specific group of demons was the (demonic) Seven (Sebetu/Sibitti). In this text three instances of the Mesopotamian medico-magical and literary sphere in which the Seven play important roles will be mentioned: a part of the series *Udug-hul* (or *Utukku lemmutu*) incantations (*Incantations against evil demons*), *The Story of*

*Gilgamesh and Huwawa (A and B)*, and the *Poem of Erra* (or *Erra and Ishum*; the *Erra Song, Erra*). This brief overview covers only a negligible fragment of the vast precious tradition of Mesopotamia, overlooked in these intellectual areas, but the idea is for it to serve as an introduction to these topics for the Macedonian public.

The Seven, known as the Seven demons, or warriors, in certain contexts act as protectors. There are numerous references to the Seven (or seven twice two, or multiplications of seven), which does not mean that each time a group of seven is mentioned, it is the case of these (demonic) Seven (Sebettu), especially considering the importance and prevalence of the number seven through the Mesopotamian cultural traditions. Wiggermann defines the Seven (demons) as a divine heptad of a (neo) Sumerian origin, or as an anthropomorphic, or rarely theriomorphic incarnation of the Pleiades. The group consists of, Wiggermann summarizes, seven anonymous brothers, belligerent supporters in the cosmic events. As harbingers of death and destruction, they are sometimes associated with Nergal, or Erra; they get identified with deities of foreign, hostile peoples; with the sons of the defeated ruler of the primordial cosmos, Enmeshara; or the warlike hybrid subjects of Ninurta (Ningirsu/Ningursaga, Wiggermann 2009, 459).

There have been references to the Seven (demons) for millennia (from about 2100 BCE until the fourth century AD), but, since they fall under different sources and literary genres (from incantations to epics, from royal inscriptions to hymns to the gods), it is difficult to determine whether they regard the same group of creatures. Still, some development of the perception of these Seven can be traced, at least concerning references in which the seven are explicitly demonic, like in the *Udug-hul incantations*, or ambivalent warriors/helpers, or players of protective and benevolent roles. Besides, a transformation may be identified, or rather an inclusion, of the Seven into the “pantheon”, and with that, a certain cultic practice. Their ambivalence can be attested in the fact that in these instances the seven do not cease to be of demonic nature.

It was believed that the Seven (demons) were created through the unification of the celestial god An and the earth (Urash), and that they were given to the gods of the Netherworld (Erra and Nergal) as assistants, to help them out and accompany them in battle. They appear as military companions to other gods as well (like in the fight of Marduk against Tiamat), or, as it shall be mentioned later in the text, to people (in the journey of Gilgamesh through the mountains, to the Cedar Forest). In *Erra* the Seven are restless, bored of the peaceful way of live, and they encourage Erra to return to his belligerent ways. Ishum, the servant of the underworldly Erra, is the keeper of the Seven, he is the “door bolted before them” (*Erra* I, 27).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The edition used for *Erra* is Foster 2005. To avoid an overload in the text, the title of the work at hand will not be mentioned repeatedly, but only in the instances where a possible confusion might appear.

It can be assumed that the conception of the Seven has fluctuated, but kept some of its basic elements. The Neo-Assyrian kings of the first millennium referred to the artistic representations and the characteristics of the Seven, in order to place them in their pantheon without subtracting their frightening and menacing powers, thus inclining more towards their representation in their initial demonic nature. This means that a combination of the demonic and the divine appears, or a transformation of the demonic into the (menacingly) divine.

Konstantopoulos claims that throughout their long-standing appearance in Mesopotamia, the group of demons had an expectedly horrifying form, first gaining an increased prevalence in the Sumerian literary texts of the early second millennium, before the “meteoric jump” of the number of instances in the Neo-Assyrian empire of the first millennium (2015, 1). Certain cults of the Seven can be noticed occasionally, from the Neo-Sumerian period onwards, but the group becomes truly, officially significant only in the first millennium Assyria, when it becomes a part of the official “pantheon”. Wiggermann remarks that because of this, unlike the examples of most other deities, the extant proofs about the Seven have been formed not by the mythological tradition, but due to the royal military involvement (2009, 459). Throughout the *Udug-hul incantations* seven demons are mentioned several times (sometimes as the scary Seven, or merely, “the Seven”). They are described with different attributes, and represented as they bring various kinds of evil. The demonic Seven are often described with the characteristics of atmospheric phenomena. They hover like difficult days and threaten like sharp winds. The seven are evil storms that bring bad winds (*Udug-Hul/UH* 5, 76-78).<sup>2</sup> They are a flood, incessantly bubbling through the earth; the seven gods of the wide skies; the seven gods of the broad Underworld. They are seven evil Lamashtu, or Lamassu, demons of sickness, seven of the Sky and seven of the Underworld (5, 82-90).<sup>3</sup>

In *Udug-hul* it is mentioned that the first of the Seven is the angry South Wind, and the second is a vulture with a gaping mouth, to whom no one dares come near (16, 4-6). The third is described as an angry panther; the fourth as a scary snake; the fifth demon is a roaring lion, whom no one manages to turn away; the sixth is a surging wave that floods the god and the ruler; the seventh acts as a messenger for Anu (16, 7-12). The demons overcast, they bring twilight from one city to the next; they are sand storms that angrily wander in the sky, or heaving clouds that cause the sky to darken. They are a gush of rising wind, which causes darkness in an otherwise bright day. They are a flooding storm, and they constantly blaze like lightning bolts on the horizon (16, 13-20). The Seven are evil gods that rise up like a flood and inundate the earth, those who

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<sup>2</sup> The edition used for *Udug-Hul* is Geller 2015.

<sup>3</sup> In this incantation the malevolent creatures are then solemnly expelled, and, like most, this incantation concludes with the summary that it is an *udug hul* incantation (5, 100). On the status and the actions of the evil demons in *Udug-Hul*, see also Тодоровска 2021, 65-78.

rise up from the earth like a tempest (16, 60-63). The evil Seven are demons of the storm that meddle into everything, evil gods, unforgiving spirits who were born in the foundation of the sky (16, 1-3). They are constant harmful agents, ready to take a part in any evil, maliciously ready to murder every day. The Seven are sheriff-demons devoid of shame, simply incapable of acting well (5, 124-130). They bring illnesses and troubles, they grind the earth like flour, not sparing anyone, raging against people, causing bleedings and then drinking the blood from the veins (5, 131-134).<sup>4</sup>

Among these incantations there are some on demons of a so-called “good pedigree”, two times seven “heroes” (a formulation clearly ironic in this case, just as the one about their good pedigree), born out of the seeds of Anu (5, 156-158). They are constantly loitering in the streets, causing disorders (5, 159-160). The Seven of the source of Apsu, adorned in the sky (the adornment is ironic as are the previous two instances), are sexless, they are spectres rushing around, they take no husbands or wives, nor do they reproduce (5, 167-173). They are incapable of sparing or saving anyone, they never listen to plights and supplications (still, the proper ritual paired with the incantation should manage to expulse them, 5, 174-175).<sup>5</sup>

### The seven warriors in the *Story of Gilgamesh and Huwawa (A and B)*

One of the earliest appearances of the Seven is not in the medico-magical sphere, or the cultic-ritual practice, but in the Sumerian literature, in the *Story of Gilgamesh and Humbaba/Huwawa* (or *The Epic of Gilgamesh and Humbaba/Huwawa*).<sup>6</sup> In later texts, like *Erra*, the Seven are represented as having a different (divine) nature.

Huwawa (Humbaba), called the “Terrifying” was a monstrous giant raised by the god Utu.<sup>7</sup> Huwawa is of an apparently non-human or superhu-

<sup>4</sup> In this incantation they are represented as the image of the gods in the house of the Sacred mound, the “distant mountains”, or Duku, the Underworld. Hence, they have a shared origin with the gods, as well as a shared initial placement: at the very source of the natural order of things.

<sup>5</sup> The Seven are also mentioned in *Udug-Hul* as a group of sons of the same mother, in a description of the origin and actions of a group of demons: the evil demons who return to the steppe; warriors, sons of one mother, the Seven (...) – then there are a dozen empty lines (6, 154'-155'). This is a description similar to the one of the seven envoys of Utu in the *Story of Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, which will be covered briefly in the next part of this text.

<sup>6</sup> In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in Akkadian, the name featured is Humbaba, as is in the Sumerian *Hymn to Hendursaga*. The full form of the Old-Babylonian version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* is not extant, but some tablets confirm that an *Epic of Gilgamesh* from this period existed in a smaller, but not a less impressive scale (Fleming and Milstein 2010, 1).

<sup>7</sup> On the possible identifications of Huwawa with other creatures, like the supreme god of Elam, Humban, a protective creature from the legends of the Greek period in North-

man nature and characteristics. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the voice of Huwawa (or, rather, Humbaba), is described as a flood (the great deluge); his speech is like fire, and his breath is like death (II, 291-292).<sup>8</sup> In order to keep the forest safe, he hears a rustle from hundreds of kilometres away (II, 293, 298). Also, his fate bestowed upon him by Enlil is to be a horror for the people (II, 299). This is a key feature for his ability to protect the forest successfully (it is not enough to merely notice the dangers; he needs to be able to protect the territory).

The text of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (from the version A<sup>9</sup> and the version B) narrates the confrontation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and Huwawa.<sup>10</sup> Gilgamesh, having understood that, like all other mortals, has a limited time on this earth, decides to make a name for himself, before he looks upon the necessary fate.<sup>11</sup> So, he decides to travel to the remote Land of the living, known as the Cedar Forest (or land), with the (possible) intention to fell the cedars and bring them to Erech/Uruk (A, 1-9). Gilgamesh informs his constant companion Enkidu of this plan, to which Enkidu advises that they first introduce the plan to Utu, the sun god, because he is the one responsible for the Cedar Forest. Acting according to this advice, Gilgamesh brings gifts to Utu and pleads for his support for the journey (A, 10-19). Utu is at first hesitant, but then he feels sorry and decides to help, by (probably) mobilizing in some way the seven evil demons who personify the destructive weather phenomena that could be a threat to Gilgamesh during his journey through the seven mountains that lie between Uruk and the Land of the living (A, 34-48).

Joyful, Gilgamesh gathers fifty followers from Uruk, men with no family obligations (who have no house, nor mother), and who are ready to accompany him in whatever he is doing, so they start their campaign. Enkidu begs Gilgamesh to turn back, for the keeper of the cedars is the horrifying monster-giant Huwawa, whose destructive attack no one can withstand (A, 95-110), but Gilgamesh does not listen to these pleads for precaution (A, 115-120). From his cedar house, Huwawa observes what is happening, and thus attempts some frenzied, but fruitless attempts to chase away Gilgamesh and his party. Then several lines are missing, after which Gilgamesh has felled seven trees and has reached (probably) Huwawa's inner chamber. It is interesting

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ern Syria, or other characters, see the summary in Hansman (1976, 26).

<sup>8</sup> The edition used for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is George 2003.

<sup>9</sup> The version A is part of the "Ten", a group of ten texts which circulated as a usual element of the Old-Babylonian scribal curriculum (see Tinney 1999, 159-172).

<sup>10</sup> Kramer replaces the title of his own initial translation, with "Gilgamesh in the Land of the living", (Kramer 1947, 3-4). This version by Kramer is used for this text.

<sup>11</sup> Kramer underlines that in this case it is not the quest for immortality which encourages Gilgamesh to travel to the Land of the living, but instead his wish for glory, for a name made and widely known (1947, 4).

that after the first, rather light attack by Gilgamesh, Huwawa seems consumed by fear, and begs for mercy and protection. The tentative assumption would be that the mere unexpected fact that someone has valiantly stood up to Huwawa is enough to frighten him. Gilgamesh, it seems, wants to behave as a generous and merciful winner, and in somewhat cryptic formulations, suggests to Enkidu that they let Huwawa go free (A, 145-154). Nevertheless, Enkidu, apprehensive of the potential consequences and the possible retaliation by Huwawa, advises Gilgamesh against this noble, but unwise decision (A, 156-161).<sup>12</sup>

There is a difference between the two versions (A and B) of the story in the representation of the seven warriors, seven brothers, sons of one mother, which Utu offers to Gilgamesh. In *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A*, Gilgamesh begs Utu for help in his adventure to the Cedar Forest, and Utu acquiesces, and sends him seven warriors, who are described with specific epithets. The manner in which they are described is characteristic for (almost) all instances in which the Seven are described when they are featured as individuals, rather than as a group (like the *Udug-hul incantations* and *Erra*). Gilgamesh goes in front of Utu and explains the awareness of his own mortality, as well as the fact that he wishes to go into the mountains (the sacred place, the Cedar Forest), and make a name for himself.<sup>13</sup> Utu accepts this sincere despair, and accepts the tears of Gilgamesh as a suitable gift. Utu explains that there are seven warriors, sons of one mother. The first, the oldest brother, has paws like a lion and talons like an eagle. The second one is (...) a snake (...). The third one is a dragon snake (...). The fourth blazes like fire (...). The fifth is (...) the (first) snake, looming over (...). The sixth strikes at the flanks of the mountains like a battering flood, like all-destroying flood-water. The seventh (...) flashes like a lightning and no one can deflect him (his power). Utu tells Gilgamesh that they should guide him towards (and through) the mountain valleys. The warrior, the youthful Utu, confirms the text again, gives these seven to Gilgamesh, and he (the "feller of cedars") is filled with joy (A, 34-47). The seven warriors serve Gilgamesh as guides and protectors, to deflect the dangers which might befall him during the journey. They act as guides because they know the mountain passages.<sup>14</sup>

The brothers who are sent to accompany Gilgamesh are terrifying, (super) monstrous, and untouchably powerful, but are still expected to serve

<sup>12</sup> Huwawa offendedly criticizes this ungenerous position (A, 162-164); Gilgamesh and Enkidu take Huwawa in front of the great gods Enlil and Ninlil (A, 166-170). Thus ends the extant part of the text.

<sup>13</sup> Where glory can be achieved, self-confidently adds Gilgamesh, he will attain his glory; where glory cannot be attained, he will make famous the names of the gods (A, 21-33).

<sup>14</sup> In the version B, the older of the two, this part is more extensive, and it explains that the knowledge of geography is linked to their role of stars, their identification with the Pleiades.

him. There is some similarity, as it was mentioned, of these divinely sent creatures in Gilgamesh's adventure, with the descriptions of the Seven demons of *Udug-hul*, and the Seven in *Erra*. Discovering which source refers to which is a matter of an independent intertextual and pluri-perspective analysis. It remains unclear whether the Seven warriors from the story about the Cedar Forest merely resemble the Seven demons from other sources of the Mesopotamian tradition, or are, in fact, the same Seven (demons).

It is interesting that in the text of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, although Gilgamesh is overwhelmed with joy by the inclusion of the Seven in his adventure party, he still takes the people: he gathers his own group of skilled mortals, which is expected for someone who goes on an adventure with potential dangers. It is especially curious that this part of the description of the warriors chosen by Gilgamesh is similar to that of the Seven (warriors). In the description of their crossing of the seven mountains, the sons of the city who accompany Gilgamesh, or rather the first (kin), their oldest brother (which, again, resembles the description of the seven brothers of one mother) is featured with paws like a lion and talons like an eagle (A, 51-52). However, the human warriors tremble with fear from Huwawa (like puppies, they tremble before his feet, A, 64), because, although the descriptions may be similar, it is perfectly clear that they are not the Seven. On the other hand, Huwawa himself, the monstrous giant and supernatural terrifying protector, also experiences a rather typically human existential crisis, having been defeated by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

The descriptions are different in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B*. It seems that in this version the seven brothers are individuals, but the text is too damaged to boldly accomplish a plausible reconstruction. Nothing is known about the epithets from the first to the fourth brother, due to the blanks in the lines, the fifth is described as blazing; the sixth, that he is like a rising wave that strikes the flanks of the hills (mountains), like a flood upon the earth; the seventh flashes like lightning, and no man can approach him (B, 42-44). The text continues by describing that they who shine in the sky (another possible connection with the stars), know the roads on the earth (B, 45). In the skies, they shine (...), they who are elated (above), and on the earth they know the road to Aratta;<sup>15</sup> like merchants they know the paths; like pigeons, they know the mountain crannies, and so they guide him (Gilgamesh) through the mountain valleys (B, 46-50).

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<sup>15</sup> On the existence of Aratta as a real place as opposed to a literary construct, see in detail in Majidzadeh 1976, 105-113; Hansmen 1978, 331-336.

The Seven in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B* know the road to Aratta, which might be interpreted in the sense that they, as supernatural and liminal creatures, possess knowledge of the places beyond the known boundaries (the motherland, Mesopotamia, but also of that which is transcendent to the mortals).

### The Seven demons in the *Poem of Erra*

The text of the *Poem of Erra*, or *Erra and Ishum* (or, per the previously announced abbreviation of the title, *Erra*), is a depiction of violence, of its inception, course, and consequences. It seems that one of the points of *Erra* is that violence (especially when tremendously cruel and unjustifiably unprovoked) should be feared the most, as the potentially worst power – it can revoke the order established by the gods, and in its frenzy, destroy all the accomplishments and hopes of the civilization. The author of *Erra* must have witnessed violence, and suffered the consequences of violence and war, Foster thinks (1996, II, 757). If people understand the nature of violence, and if they grasp how it can rage out of control and devour everything in its path, they can hope to be able to keep it at bay. In the contemporary circumstances in which these lines are being written (spring of 2022), this is remarkably relevant.

The text of the poem narrates how the hellish belligerent god Erra, who secretly intended to destroy humanity, convinces Marduk to relegate to him the control of the world, so that he can, with immense pleasure, and through deception and cynicism, utterly destroy it. Erra goes into a rabid destructive campaign, and ravages the world. The decisive role in the restoration of peace is played by Ishum, Erra's assistant, who, at the end, is capable to contain (if not prevent) the evil perpetrated by the god of war, and his angry and restless assistants, the Seven (demons).

The *Poem of Erra* begins with the exaltation of Ishum (known as Hendursaga),<sup>16</sup> described as a nocturnal and protective god. Erra is restless, and he bursts into a soliloquy – impatient to fight and conquer, he still hesitates due to some natural inertia. What Erra needs to stir into action, is some encouragement by Ishum. Ishum is described as the king of all inhabited lands, the creator of the world (being called “Hendursaga”),<sup>17</sup> first-born to Enlil, who holds the sublime sceptre, and herdsman of the black-haired people, the shepherd of humanity. The text continues with “O, Ishum, a zealous slaughterer, whose hands are suited to brandish fierce weapons”, and who makes his sharp spear flash (I, 1-4).<sup>18</sup>

Erra, the text continues, has gotten fidgety in his dwelling, and his heart exhorts him to battle. Therefore, he has commanded his weapons, the frightening Seven, to smear themselves with deadly poison. To the Seven, warriors unmatched, he has ordered to prepare their weapons (I, 4-9). Then there is an

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<sup>16</sup> On the long-confirmed identification (Hendursaga in Sumerian contexts, and Ishum in Akkadian), through the basis of numerous sources, see George 2015, 1-2. Verderame remarks that, knowing the identification of Hendursaga with Ishum, the connection of the *Hymn to Hendursaga* and the *Poem of Erra* becomes obvious (Verderame 2017, 285).

<sup>17</sup> Foster states that it is simply another name for Ishum (1996, II, 758).

<sup>18</sup> The text of *Erra* used here is from Foster 1996.



unclear formulation in which it reads “he says to you: (...) you are the torch,<sup>19</sup> they will see your light, you are the vanguard (...)” (I, 10-11). In the next lines there is some urging for Erra: “up from laying waste the land; how cheerful your mood will be and joyful your heart!” (I, 12-14). However, Erra’s limbs are sluggish, like those of a mortal suffering from insomnia. So, he asks himself whether he should get up or get back to sleep. He commands his weapons to remain in the corners; to the Seven, warriors without equals, to retreat to their dwellings. Until he is woken up, this part wraps up, he will sleep in his chambers, slumbering with his companion, Mami (I, 15-20).

After this introductory description, there follows a description of the seven nefarious divine creatures, the Seven, who are now given the main role. They stand ready to massacre the black headed people of Mesopotamia. The Seven are warriors unparalleled, their nature is different, their origin distinct; they are horrifying; whoever sets eyes on them, gets paralyzed by fear (I, 23-25). The breath of life of the Seven is, in fact, death, and people are too afraid to come near them. However, Ishum, as it was previously mentioned, limits them (I, 26-28). They were given to Erra, but are related to Ishum, who is their keeper, the only one capable of controlling them. He is the gate bolted before the Seven (I, 27).<sup>20</sup>

The Seven are described as warriors without a rival, whose divine nature is different, whose origin is distinct. They were created by An when he scattered his seeds upon the Earth.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, their different nature is significant – the demons are ambivalent and liminal; although it is often spoken about them with the use of divine determinatives, they have no cults (or at least not until the military-propagandic cult of the Neo-Assyrian rule). From a cultic standpoint, they do not have temples, and no sacrifices can be offered to them. In the *Poem of*

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<sup>19</sup> Ishum is like a torch that gets followed into battle – from here, it can be assumed that the light with which Ishum (Hendursaga) lights up the path for people, so they can arrive home safely at night, is in fact some sort of a divine torch. Or, as George assumes, the divine power of Ishum is in the fiery blaze of the torch, and his name comes from the Akkadian word for “torch” (2015, 4).

<sup>20</sup> In this way the protective aspect of Ishum is underlined. In the last lines of the poem, partly auto-referentially, it reads that Erra and the Seven will not approach a house in which the tablet of the song is placed (V, 57). Thus, the text of *Erra* has a prophylactic function. In this sense, the characteristics of Ishum and the Seven are in a state of tension, which is why they function indivisibly and complementarily (V, 40-60).

<sup>21</sup> When Anu, the king of the gods, planted his seeds upon the Earth, she gave birth to seven gods, who were called “The Seven”, and so they stood before An, waiting for their destinies to be announced (I, 23f, 30f).

In his paper titled exactly after these lines, Verderame (2012) emphasizes that the insistence on the divine nature and the distinct origin of the Seven is a statement applicable to all the demons (2012, 118). The Seven as the Seeds of Anu were mentioned in the references from *Udug-Hul*, see V, 2; IV, 1-3; V, 10.

*Erra* their divine status is distinct, or unclear.<sup>22</sup> Although they are produced by An, the epithet “son/daughter of An” is not usual for any demons, and is mostly limited to Lamashtu (Wiggermann, 2000, 217–252). The description sounds like the already mentioned relevant parts of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, and determines for each of these creatures what role they would be playing, or what kind of fate they would fulfil: to the first of the Seven he says that he is to roam around and spread fear, and that he will have no equal; to the second, that he will blaze like fire and burn like flames; to the third, that he will have the form of a lion, so that whoever looks at him will remain paralyzed; the fourth will have fierce weapons that will tore down mountains; the sixth will stalk and prowl (up and down) and spare no one; and the seventh, full of deadly snake venom, will destroy every life (*Erra*, I, 31-38).<sup>23</sup>

After Anu determined the destinies of the Seven, he gave them to Erra, the warrior of the gods, so they could be by his side, and so that when the noise of the human dwellings becomes too annoying, and he decides to cause destruction, massacre the black-haired men and strike their cattle, the Seven could be his fierce weapons (I, 39-44). The Seven gleefully offer the encouragement that Erra needs. Thus, in an exhortation to reach for weapons and head to battle, they emphasize the heroic thrill of the military campaign, as well as the honour, prestige, and pleasure it brings. The Seven are the ones who, in anger, brandishing their weapons, tell Erra to go on, “fulfil your duty!”. They blame him that he has been sitting in the city like a sickly old man for too long, or like a helpless child, and they refuse to eat “woman food”, like non-combatants. Additionally, they wonder whether they will not turn fearful and trembling, as if unable to fight (I, 43-50). Then they describe how much better the battle is than the cosy, but inglorious life in the city and one’s own chambers (I, 46-59).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the incantations, they are not considered to be gods, but their messengers and executive agents. Sometimes they are defined as “evil gods”, messengers of Anu; carriers of the throne of the gods (see *UH*, XII, 15; XVI, 12, 35, 42; V, 158).

<sup>23</sup> The descriptions of the destructive capabilities of the Seven reflect, or rather, anticipate, the destructive actions by Erra in the following parts of the poem, which function as parallels to other parts (see Bodi 1991, 104). To the second he says to blaze like fire, and burn like flames (*Erra*, I, 33), while Erra says he is the blaze in the reeks and flames in the grass (I, 113); cf. he destroyed the reeks and the grasses, burned them like fire (IV, 149). To the third, he says to look like a lion, to destroy everyone he sees (I, 34), while Erra is described as a lion-like snake (IIC, 21-22), and he is said to have gotten a lion-like form, and entered the palace (IV, 21). The fourth should tore down mountains with his horrifying weapons, and Erra is repeatedly said to bring down mountains. Some similarity can be spotted between the sixth, who should roam everywhere, with the self-glorifying formulation of Erra when he says that he blows like the wind, thunders like Adad, and observes the entire world like Shamash (I, 115-116).

<sup>24</sup> The contrast between the city and the field is actually a contrast between the ordered, the civilized, and the wilderness, the chaotic, Eden (the plateaus, the steppes), beyond which the mountains are situated. The preference for the wilderness is obvious for the Seven: in *Udug-Hul* the demons are shown as creatures born and/or reared far (or deep)

Then they urge Erra to go into the fields, to make his weapons rattle; to shake everything around with his mighty roar, so that everyone, humans and gods, can hear him and tremble. (I, 60-75).<sup>25</sup> The Seven, it seems, are claiming that they lack respect, or that (some) others are becoming more important than them.<sup>26</sup> They mention the old accusation that people are making too much noise, preventing the gods from slumbering calmly.<sup>27</sup> They ask why Erra is neglecting his duties in the fields, when the beasts themselves, and various creatures look at them with disdain. The entire earth has outgrown them, the Seven warn Erra, and they advise him to do a good deed for the gods of hell, who enjoy a deathly silence, for the Anunna-gods who cannot fall asleep due to the clamour of humanity (I, 76-84). However, in the events of *Erra*, this is not the case: it is the restless Seven who urge Erra to get up from his cosy nap. The Seven are using deceit, apart from the sincere cruel formulations in their attempt to point to a *casus belli* – that both Erra and they are deteriorating in their abilities, and that they are simply bored. In the Mesopotamian tradition the noise and the silence are used as symbols for action and the lack thereof, for action and rest (from action; Michalowski 1990, 385). The last claim made by the Seven, and the most important, as it shows the bizarreness and banality of evil, is that they are

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in the mountains. Thus, the field, the wilderness, the open space, remind them of their origin, and correspond to their liminal nature. Besides, as Richardson notices, although the literary tradition of Mesopotamia usually places the events in the urban areas, the real adventures transpire in the fields, in the wild, and beyond (Richardson, 2007, 18).

<sup>25</sup> The Seven urge Erra to go to the field and make his weapons rattle (I, 60); a few lines later the formulation is “(...) let men turn cowards, and their clamor subside” (I, 73). Machinist remarks on the connection between the noise and the destructiveness of Erra and the “clamor” of the people (1983, 224). The problem of rest and activity will be mentioned again later in the text.

<sup>26</sup> Konstantopoulos notices that the problem of the Seven that they are no longer respected like they once were, as a result of the diminishment of their military campaigns, is really an issue which partially reflects the relatively novel status of their cult (2015, 170).

<sup>27</sup> Anu gives the fates to the Seven, and relegates them to Erra, so that he can use the Seven, should the clamor of mankind become too insufferable; or rather, if it becomes inconvenient to put up with the humans, inconsiderately loud in their dwellings (see I, 40-44). Erra, however, is not provoked by the noise or inconvenience caused by the people, but precisely because the Seven insist that he stopped napping cozily, and move into war. This is a recurring topic in Mesopotamia. In the myth for Atra-hasis (or Atrahasis) from around the eighteenth-century B. C. E., the story is about the overpopulation of the people. In order for their numbers to decline, Enlil sends famine and draughts in intervals of one thousand and two hundred years. Enlil also decides to destroy humanity with a deluge, but Atrahasis is warned by Enki (depicted as good and merciful, and like the counterpoint to the capricious and cruel Enlil), and should build a boat to escape along with his family and various animal breeds. Enlil gets mad that Enki has violated the trust and broken the promise to not talk about the looming end of humanity, but Enki claims that he only made sure that life gets preserved, and in the end they agree to keep the human population under control in other ways (the text used is from Pritchard 1969, 104-106).

bored, and in need of a good workout (for their skills). They claim that although they once had knowledge of the mountain passes, they have long forgotten it, that cobwebs have surrounded their military equipment; their bows have become too hard for their diminished strength, the tip of the sharp arrow has since gotten crooked, and the blades have rusted over, while hoping for carnage (I, 87-90).

Erra is cheered up by these words (“what the Seven have said pleased him like the finest oil”), and asks Ishum why he is quietly sitting around, instead of immediately launching the campaign. Erra is eager to start right away – the Seven, his horrifying weapons, should march at his side, and Ishum should bring up the rear (I, 91-99). Ishum protests, claiming that violence and destruction are evil. Erra gets annoyed, tells him to keep quiet, and passionately lounges into an auto-panegyric – he is the bravest, the bull of the sky and the lion on the earth, a king on the earth and the fiercest among the gods; he is a warrior among the Igigi and a mighty figure among the Anunna-gods; a destroyer of wild beasts, a ram to tore down the mountains; he is the flame in the reed thicket, who blasts like the wind and thunders like the storm. Like the sun, Erra continues, he scans the circumference of the world; he is the wild ram who strides forth in the steppe (I, 106-118). If the people do not respect the gods, Erra claims, and the others are too cowardly to actually do something about that, he will fix things. Erra finds an excuse, or a reason: if the presumed lack of respect is contrary to Marduk’s wishes, Erra will make Marduk leave his dwelling, and will execute the punishment which humanity deserves (I, 119-123). This transpires, and a rampage of destructive, horrible chaos ensues.

In the text of tablet V, Erra, in one last wave of self-praise, addresses the gods. He speaks highly of Ishum and emphasizes that, not without pride, in his fury and courage, he, Erra, has made a mistake in attacking the rulers of the cosmos and their subjects. If it were not for Ishum’s timely intervention, who known where Erra’s own quivering fury would have taken him, he muses. Ishum is joyful, since all this is nice and lovely, but asks Erra to finally settle down, having made his point (V, 40-60).<sup>28</sup> The demons in *Erra* are the instigators and catalysts of violence, their wickedness leads to the destruction of the world. Erra is the main villain of the events, but they would not have happened in such a way without the cruel influence of the Seven’s destructive nature.

The Seven from the three sources chosen for this text are depicted as evil and harmful harbingers of all sorts of horrific troubles; as guides, warriors and helpers-protectors; and as a group of harmful wicked creatures who facilitate the deterioration of the world, and its downward spiral into destruc-

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<sup>28</sup> Wisnom sees Erra’s victory as perverted: it does not bring a new order in the world, like the victory of Marduk, but causes the ruin of the world (2019, 281). The long laments about the destruction caused by the events clearly show the condemnation of such violence, and emphasize the suffering of their victims (George 2013, 56).

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tion and imaginable misery. These different representations confirm that the demonic is not just one thing: it is versatile and multifaceted in the Mesopotamian beliefs and literary works. Given the long-standing neglect in our intellectual environment of these aspects of the religious beliefs, moral positions, and general characteristics of the ancient cultures, this initial overview can serve as an introduction for further research of these topics in the Macedonian intellectual milieu.

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