

Marduk the Fisherman

SELENA WISNOM

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

This note considers Marduk's use of the net in *Enūma eliš*. This weapon is usually assumed to be a net for catching birds inherited from Marduk's relationship to Ninurta mythology, since Ninurta's opponent in battle was the demonic bird Anzû. Here it is suggested that the net can also be used as a fishing net and portrays Marduk as a fisherman. This coheres with the nature of Marduk's opponent, Ti'āmtu, whose name means sea, and also fits into the depiction of Marduk taking over from Enlil as chief god in *Enūma eliš*, since Enlil is also described as both fisher and fowler in Sumerian texts. Thus an image that is sometimes thought to be awkwardly borrowed is shown to be coherently integrated after all, adding another dimension to the depiction of Marduk in battle.

In the Babylonian “Epic of Creation” *Enūma eliš*,¹ the god Marduk does battle with a creature called “Sea” (Ti'āmtu), ultimately defeating her and creating heaven and earth from her body. Marduk kills Ti'āmtu first by ensnaring her in a net, forcing the winds into her belly, and shooting her with an arrow (*Enūma eliš* IV 95–104). This net has been viewed as awkward: Lambert argued that it makes no sense to use a net against a body of water, and so it must be a disjointed adaptation of a motif that properly belongs to another context (1986: 59). *Enūma eliš* borrows from a broad range of other texts (Katz 2011; Seri 2014), but especially from *Anzû*, a composition about Ninurta's battle against the lion-headed eagle demon after whom the poem is conventionally named.² The net is therefore usually assumed to derive from some version of Ninurta's capture of Anzû that no longer survives, since although Ninurta does not use a net in the *Anzû* poem, it is deemed to be a more suitable device for catching a bird than the sea.³ While it does indeed seem odd to use a bird-net against the sea, there is another possibility that has so far been overlooked: that it is actually a fishing net.

Nets were used for catching both birds and fish in Mesopotamia. The Akkadian word *bā'iru* means both bird-catcher and fisherman,⁴ and it is perfectly possible for one god to be depicted in both of these roles. Enlil in particular is often portrayed as both fowler and fisherman in Sumerian *balags*.⁵ In an article about bird imagery in Sumerian poetry Jeremy Black identifies “Enlil the fowler” as a recurring theme, and picks out three examples that

1. Edition Lambert 2013.

2. First established by Lambert 1986, subsequently discussed by Machinist 2005: 39; Katz 2011; and Seri 2014: 101. The edition of *Anzû* is by Annus 2001.

3. As argued by Lambert 1986: 59 and followed by Seri 2012: 15. The inference is made based on a simile referring to the snaring of Anzû by Nergal (often assimilated with Ninurta) in *Erra and Išum* III.C 33 (although the word for ‘net’ is itself restored), and a bilingual litany to Nabû where he is described as the one who caught the Anzû bird in a net (*še-e-tu₂*) (Lambert 1971: 344, l. 14). This litany is based on syncretism of Nabû with Ninurta, since it mentions Ninurta's traditional exploits (Lambert 1986: 59).

4. “[T]he *bā'iru* must be considered a hunter as well as a fisherman” (CAD B: 33), particularly on the basis of a hemerological entry LU₂ŠU.HA KU₆ MUŠEN *nam-maš-šu-u* [*la i-bar-ma*] “a hunter [must not catch] fish, birds, or animals (Sm 948, edition Livingstone 2013: 201, l. 4’). AHW (p. 96) gives the meaning as “Fänger” of both fish and animals.

5. See the study of Black 1996.

refer to Enlil fishing and fowling consecutively (1996: 27–28). Two of these are also bilingual, showing that the imagery has crossed over from Sumerian into Akkadian:

a-a ^dmu-ul-lil₂-la₂ sa bi₂-ib₂-si₃-si₃-ga sa-bi sa kur₂-ra
 a-bi ^dMIN še-e-tu₂ ta-ad-di-ma še-e-tu₂ ši-i še-e-tu₂ nak-rim-ma
 umun ka-naĝ-ĝa₂ gu₃ in-de₂-de₂-e gu₃-bi gu₃ kur₂-ra
 be-lum ma-a-tu₂ ta-as₃-si ši-si-it nak-rim-ma
 kur-gal ^dmu-ul-lil₂ a in-lu₃-lu₃-e ku₆ in-dab₅-dab₅-be₂
 ša-du-u₂ GAL-u₂ ^dMIN me-e ta-ad-luĥ-ma nu-u₂-nu ta-bar
 umun ka-naĝ-ĝa₂ sa in-ga-nu₂-e buru₅ in-ga-ur-ur-re
 be-lum ma-a-tu₄ še-e-tu₂ ta-ad-di-ma iṣ-ṣu₂-ra-a-tu₄ ta-šu₂-uṣ

Father Enlil places a net, that net is a hostile net,
 the lord of the land calls out, that call is a hostile call.
 The Great Mountain Enlil stirs up the water, he catches the fish,
 he set up half of her and roofed the heavens.⁶

Ame Amašana 9–12 (Cohen 1988: 154)

sa₂ bi₂-si₃-si₃-ge ^{sa}sa₂-bi ^{sa}sa₂-kur₂-ra-am₃
 še-tu₂ uṣ-te-šir₃-ma še-e-tu šu₂¹-i še-e-et na-ak-rim-ma
 ṛgu₃¹ in-de₂-de₂-e ^{gu}gu₃-bi ^{gu}gu₃ kur₂-ra-am₃
 ṛqa¹-šu₂ it-ru-uṣ-ma qu₃-u šu-u₂ qu₃-e na-ak-rim-ma
 []x-lu₃-lu₃ ku₆ in-dab₅-dab₅-be₂
 []x-ma nu-ni i-bar
 [sa in]-ṛga-an-nu₂¹-e buru₅ in-ga-an-ur₄-re
 [še-tu₂] id-di²-ma [iṣ-ṣu-ra-]ṛti¹ i-šu-uṣ

He lays a net, that net is a hostile net⁷
 He calls out, that call is a hostile call⁸
 ... he catches the fish
 he lays down a net, he gathers the birds
 KAR 375 ii 9–16

a bi₂-lu₃ ku₆ bi₂-dab
 sa ba-e-nu₂ buru₅^{mušen} bi₂-lah₅

You disturbed the water, you caught the fish,
 You laid down a net, you brought in small birds
 Eršemma no. 160, 33–34 (Cohen 1981: 128)

Fishing and fowling are often connected, not only in literary texts (Black 1996: 26), but also in administrative texts relating to the real world (Salonen 1973: 23; Owen 1981: 41). Such a relationship is natural since both professions use the same equipment, the net (Salonen 1973: 23), and the words for fishing nets and nets for catching birds are frequently the same: *šētu* and *saparru* are both used for both contexts (Salonen 1973: 43–45; 1970: 64).

6. The translation is based on the Sumerian. The Akkadian is in the preterite and second person:

Father Enlil laid a net, that net is a net of the enemy.

Lord of the land, you cried out, that cry is of the enemy.

Great Mountain Enlil, you stirred up the water, you caught fish.

Lord of the land, you laid a net, you caught the birds.

7. As in the previous quotation the Akkadian renders the verbs in the preterite.

8. This line differs more significantly in the Akkadian: “he stretched out a line, that line is a line of the enemy.”

Marduk's trapping of Ti'āmtu, then, can both derive from Ninurta's use of the net and fit perfectly well into the new context of a battle with the sea.

The *Anzū* prologue alludes to an otherwise unknown battle of Ninurta against *ku-sa-rik-ki ina qe₂-reb tām̄ti* (A.AB.BA) “the *kusarikku* in the midst of the sea” (I 12), and it would be logical enough to use a net to catch a water-dwelling creature. Ti'āmtu is not only the sea but also some kind of physical animal, since she has such features as a stomach, skull, and tail. Most interesting of all is the simile at IV 137:

*iḫ-pi-ši-ma ki-ma nu-nu maš-ṭe-e a-na ši-ni-šu
mi-iš-lu-uš-ša iš-ku-nam-ma ša-ma-mi uš-ša-al-lil*

He split her in two like a fish for drying,
with half of her he set up the heavens and made a roof.

Enūma eliš IV 137–38

This simile comparing Ti'āmtu to a fish strengthens the idea that she could have been caught with a fishing net rather than one for netting birds, and shows that the image is in fact logical after all. Cutting a fish in half after catching it so that it can be dried more easily was the normal practice in Mesopotamia: *ku₆-dar-ra* “split fish” meaning “dried fish” is a common term in third-millennium administrative texts.⁹ The simile thus casts Marduk in the role of fisherman.

Marduk's net probably does have a Ninurta background: the net is listed as one of Ninurta's weapons in *An-gin*,¹⁰ and is an attribute of Ninurta in *Lugal-e*, where he is metaphorically referred to as a net three times.¹¹ However, Seri has shown that the borrowing of the net is not clumsy, as it is more than just a weapon but also has an important function as the “matrix of creation” (2012: 15). After creating the earth, Marduk spreads the net and releases everything inside it (V 64), but only after also creating the *durmāḫu* (V 59), the cosmic bond that keeps the regions of the universe together. Therefore Seri suggests that the net was used to contain everything while the creation was taking place, and that once the cosmic bond is put in place the net is no longer needed (2012: 23). Thus the net is integrated coherently into the new context of creation. My suggestion is that its use in this battle is also perfectly coherent: rather than being a misplaced borrowing from a bird-catching context, it makes good sense for a net to be used against a creature of the sea. The simile of splitting Ti'āmtu in half like a fish cements this image, for if she can be cut in half like a fish for drying, she can certainly be caught like one as well.

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9. Salonen 1970: 47, 192, 262; Englund 1990: 211; Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991: 297.

10. Ninurta declares that he holds the *sa-al-kad₄*, “alkad-net” (I. 136) and the *sa-šu₂-uš-gal* “great net” (I. 137).

11. In line 13 Ninurta is called *ur-saḡ sa-šu₂-uš-gal lu₂-erim₂-ra šu₂-a*, “warrior, great net spread over the enemy,” at 122 he is called *sa-šu₂-uš me₃*, “net of battle,” and he is compared to a net in a simile at 126: *sa-par₃-gin₇ u₃-mu-e-dub*, “after encircling (the enemy) like a net.” Ninurta's use of the net goes back to Ningirsu in pre-Sargonic Lagash, as he is shown grasping defeated enemies in his net on the Stele of the Vultures (Seri 2012: 21). Other deities are described as using a battle net (for some examples, see Steinkeller 1985: 40–41), but given the relentless syncretism of Ninurta and Marduk in *Enūma eliš* it is reasonable to assume that it is Ninurta who is primarily referred to here. That Enlil the fowler is also invoked is also a possibility, given that the syncretism between Marduk and Enlil is also a prominent feature of this poem.

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