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Archaeology of Fire,
Conservation, Preservation and Site Management,
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Islamic Session
Selected papers from workshop sessions

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Cover illustration: Impression of a third millennium BC cylinder seal from Tell Arbid in Syria combined with the depiction of a mermaid – a motif from Warsaw's coat of arms. Designed by Łukasz Rutkowski.

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THE SYMBOLISM OF FIRE IN WAR IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA*

ELISA GIROTTO

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the symbolism of fire in war, according to Mesopotamian textual and figurative sources dating from the 3rd until the first half of the 1st millenium BC. Fire is discussed as an energy element aimed not only at destruction, but also at transformation, purification and regeneration. Fire is simultaneously a symbol and a tool of an ambivalent violence, an ideal and real manifestation of a terrible violence destined to restore order and peace. Fire could also be the hypostasis of gods' and kings' power, of their energy that is the reason and the agency of their superiority over the cosmos.

DIVINE FIRE AND FIRE IN MYTHOLOGICAL BATTLES

Due to its capacity for generating heat, light and transforming things like, for example, animals and plants into food, metals and clay into objects, fire has always played a very important role in human life. Its destructive energy can be a fatal threat for man and his environment, but it can also be a strong device of domination. Because of its vital and deadly nature and its fascinating physical aspect and behaviour – luminous and mobile, man has always placed it in the sacral sphere.

In Mesopotamia, due to its capacity for generating light, smoke, smell and therefore atmosphere, fire was rarely absent in ceremonies (Mouton 2006). Due to its transforming capacity, it was used, for example, during sacrifices to transfer offerings to the gods.[1] The cult of a fire god is attested from the Sumerian period until the Seleucid age.[2] The Fire God was a minor deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon, the son of one of the major gods.[3] Gibil is the Sumerian fire god,[4] with whom Girra was syncretized from

* I am deeply grateful to Alexander Pruss and Davide Nadali for the interesting suggestions and help they kindly gave me during the preparation of this contribution.

1 Indeed, in an incantation text Girra is defined as 'giver of food portions to the Igigi gods' (Foster 1996: 566, l.4).

2 He is mentioned, for example, in Von Weiher 1983, text 1: 16, l. 32, 4; *ibid.*: 17, l. 32; *ibid.*, text 8: 50, l. 6,7; *ibid.*, text 20 (a ritual text against ghosts): 100, l. 9.

3 Of Anu, Shamash, Ea, Nusku. In Eridu he was son of Abzu (see, for example, Foster 1996: 568). According to the 1st millennium incantation series *Maqlû*, he was son of the sky god Anu and Shala(sh) (see, for example, *ibid.*: 564, 566; Abusch and Schwemer 2008: 144, l. 136-137). In ritual texts, he is mentioned together with the god Enki/Ea (see, for example, Conti 2000: 129).

4 There is little evidence of this deity (Frankena 1971: 383-385). The earliest evidence for Gibil is found in the Early Dynastic III administrative texts from Fara and Telloh. His name is mentioned already in the Fara god list (see TCL 15, 10, 'Genouillac list', in Richter 2004: 13-16). He is also mentioned in an Ur III god list from Nippur (*ibid.*: 30, 414) and in Old Babylonian god lists (*ibid.*: 157, 255). Then, for example, in the *Enūma ēliš*, Gibil is one of the fifty aspects of Marduk (see tablet VII in Foster 1996: 398, l. 115).

the Old Babylonian period.[5] Girra was also equated with the light god Nusku.[6] Perhaps another god linked to fire is Išum, who is mentioned in the Erra epic as the 'torch'.[7] The fire god is mostly mentioned in literary texts and incantations.[8] No anthropomorphic representation of him has until now been identified.[9] His symbol, according to textual sources, is the torch. Regarding his creative aspect, Girra was the patron of metallurgy.[10] Concerning its destructive aspect, on the one hand, fire was feared for its flames that, for example, could devastate the fields;[11] on the other, its destructive energy was perceived as positive when it was directed against evil. Girra was indeed prayed to and fire was employed during purification ceremonies and in rituals against disease and black magic.[12] The role of Girra as principal vanquisher deity of the powers of sorcery is affirmed in an Old Babylonian mythological text. In this document, Girra, described as a 'ferocious warrior', defeats the witch Elamatum and Enlil, fixing Girra's fate, and declares: 'Walk with Asalluhi, the exorcist of the gods'.[13] In incantation texts, the fire god is defined as the one who shines, who purifies, who smells, who gives the gods food, who renews (see, for example, Conti 2000: 126, 129-130; Foster 1996: 566). Also in the myths, we find references of his purificatory and renewing role. In Erra's epic, for example, Girra is invoked and used to purify the regal insignia of Marduk and to heighten his *melammû* (see Cagni 1977: tablet I, l. 140-142, 181; tablet IIIc, l. 50). Moreover, Girra, as a result of his illuminating capacity, was considered to be the one who recognizes, knows the truth and thus the one who judges.[14] Therefore,

5 Indeed, in the Old Babylonian 'Weidner god list' Gibil is equated with Girra (see Weidner 1924/1925: 10).

6 Girra was worshiped with Nusku in Nippur in the É.ME.LÁM.ḪUŠ temple ('House of Awesome Radiance'), see Streck 1998/2001: 632.

7 Bottéro 1973: 10. For an interpretation of Ishum as 'god of fire', see Cagni 1977: 16-17, 84, l. 10.

8 For example, he is mentioned in the *utukkū lemnūtu* series, tablet 9, l. 43: 'Girra, ... fire and flame to the torch' (see Geller 2007: 228).

9 In glyptic of the Akkadian period, a divine figure with flames emerging from his back is depicted fighting against other deities, but this character is usually interpreted as the sun god Shamash (see Collon 1982: 68).

10 In an incantation text, Girra is said to be 'the one who mixes copper and tin, …who refines gold and silver' (see Foster 1996: 568, l. 6-7). See also *Šurpû* IX, l. 107-118, in Conti 2000: 128-130; Frankena 1957/1971: 383-385. The capacity of fire for separating metallic constituents could represent its power to divide a thing into its elements and therefore remove the bad ones; it could thus be proof of its purificatory function.

11 For example, in an incantation text Girra is defined as 'Raging, who burns up canebrakes, Brave Girra, who destroys trees and rocks' (see Foster 1996: 566, l. 6-7; see also Dossin 1983). Sargon II (721-705 BC) laid the foundations of Dur-Sharrukin 'in the month of Abu, the month of the descent of the Fire-god, destroyer of the growing (cultivated) vegetation' (see Fuchs 1994: 294, l. 61).

12 See Abusch 2002: 149-150. See, for example, the exorcistic texts of the 'Burning/Cremation' (*Maqlû*) series and the incantations of the 'Incineration/Combustion' (*Šurpu*) series, in Foster 1996: 862, text IV. 42; *ibid.*: 867-868, text IV. 44 d. Then, to remind another famous example, during the *akītu* festival in Babylon, some purification rituals were performed in Marduk's shrine with incense and a torch, while two anthropomorphic wooden figurines were burnt in front of Nabû (see Bidmead 2002: 55-6, 71, 73, 87; Linssen 2004: 226, l. 214-216). The purificatory function of the censer and torch of Girra are mentioned in the exorcistic text in Foster 1996: 591, l. 70.

13 See Walker 1983, in particular l. 16, 34. Elamatum is held responsible for a famine and the infertility of the herds.

14 Girra is said to be 'the great judge of Anu' in the *utukkū lemnūtu* series text, tablet 15, l. 41 (Geller 2007: 243).

he is also the one who punishes the evildoer.[15] In this aspect, Girra resembles Shamash, who is the judge but also a warrior who destroys enemies.[16] Indeed, Girra in the incantations is said to be the companion of Shamash, the arm and the executor of Shamash's sentences (see Abusch 2002: 17, tablet I, l. 135-143; *ibid.*: 71-74).

Fire can also be a terrible weapon used to kill and devastate. Indeed, fire is employed by gods in their battles.[17] Furthermore, their combat energy and the strength of their attack against their enemies are compared to fire in literary and religious texts.[18] For example, in the *Exaltation of Inanna* hymn, the war goddess burns the foreign lands[19] and Inanna herself is described as a 'raining blazing fire down upon the Land' (Black *et al*. 2004: 316, l. 13). In the poem *Inanna and Ebiḫ* the goddess decides to attack the evil mountain, saying: 'I shall set fire to its thick forests… I shall make Gibil, the purifier, do his work at its watercourses' (*ibid.*: 335, l. 45-48). Indeed, Inanna 'poured fire on its flanks and made its smoke dense' (*ibid*.: 338, l. 149). It is worth noting

15 In an incantation text, we read: 'O blazing Girra,…you are the one to render judgement (on what is) spoken and secret, you illuminate darkness, you set straight confusion and perturbation. You make decisions for the great gods, without you, no god reaches a verdict, you are the giver of instruction and direction. You straightaway restrain the evildoer, you straightaway overcome the wicked enemy… O stately Girra, eminent one of the gods, overcome them, you who overcome the evil and the enemy, that I be not oppressed. Let me, your servant, live in well-being and stand before you. You are my god, you are my lord, you are my judge, you are my help, you are my champion' (see Foster 1996: 564-565).

16 For example, in an incantation text, we read: 'O Girra,…, you judge the case of the oppressed man and woman… like the warrior Shamash, judge my case, render my verdict!... Consume my enemies!' (see *ibid.*: 567). For the role of Shamash as judge who burns the warlock and the witch, devours the enemies with his fiery red light, see, for example, the incantation texts in Abusch 2002: 125-126. Some evidence is present also in royal inscriptions. See, for example, Grayson 1991: 12, l. 7-8; *ibid.*: 32, col. 1, l. 4.

17 For example, Nusku, in a hymn, is described as a warrior god who throws fire at the enemy and burns the wicked of the insubmissive lands (see ETCSL: t. 4.29.1, l. 1-10). Martu, in a hymn, is described as a warrior, who 'makes fire…, subduing all in battle and fight' (see ETCSL: t. 4.12.1, l. 13-20). According to a hymn, the medicine and health goddess, Ninisina, after having stormed and 'reduced into flames its shepherd as sparto grass', killed the rebel land (Black *et al.* 2004: 254-255, l. 119-120). In a praise poem of Šulgi, we read: 'let Utu the torch catch the rebel' (see ETCSL: t. 2.4.2.02, l 297). We also find evidence for the use of fire in mythological battles in ritual texts. For example, in a ritual text related to ceremonies performed by the king in the Esagila, we read: '(the king) who kindles a fire, he is Marduk – what he did in his youth' (see Livingstone 2007: 121, l. 3). Then, according to this text a sheep roasted 'is Kingu when he burns him in the fire' (see *ibid.*: 121, l. 6); the torches employed by the king correspond to the 'unsparing arrows… of Marduk, which… slay and are drenched in the blood and gore' of the defeated gods (see *ibid*: 121-123, l. 7). Further, 'the king, who wears jewels on his head and roasts goats: he is Marduk, who carried firewood on his head and burnt the sons of Enlil and Anu in fire' (see *ibid.*: 123, l. 8).

18 For example, in the text *Erra and Naram-Sin*, the warrior god describes himself as 'a flame, the fire' (see Westenholz 1997: 195, l. 21). The warrior god Ninurta is defined as a 'powerful fire' in a hymn for Šulgi (see ETCSL: t. 2.4.2.20, l. 18). In a hymn to Ninurta for Šu-Suen, the god is defined as 'yellow evening light that casts fear over the Land, like holy Uraš, a fearsome dragon brandishing a terrible torch!' (see ETCSL: t. 2.4.4.4, l. 44). In a hymn for Iddin-Dagan, Ninisina is described as the 'Lady whose tempest, like a raging storm,… whose upraised fierce face, like a fire, rips the bodies of the enemy' (see ETCSL: t. 2.5.3.4, l. 3). In the text *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*, a divine conflict that involved 'fourteen/seven torches of battle', beloved by Inanna, is described. Once again the attack is compared to fire: 'at dead of night they pursue like wildfire' (see Black *et al.* 2004: 21, l. 462-465).

19 'Their great gateways/palaces are set afire' (*ibid*.: 317, l. 44).

that Gibil is called 'the purifier'. In the account of *Ninurta's Exploits* the attack of the warrior god and of his mace Šar-ur against the rebel lands is compared to a deluge that 'caused a rain of coals and flaming fires' (*ibid.*: 166). The fire consumed men and reduced the animals to firewood.[20] In *Ninurta's Return to Nippur* the mace Šar-ur is described as having an 'awesome radiance that covers the Land,… consuming the rebellious land like fire' (Black *et al.* 2004: 316, l.44). The destruction of lands by the gods by means of fire is a *topos* in lamentation texts.[21] For example, in the *Lament for Ur* the angry Enlil 'brought Gibil as his aid' (Samet 2009: 86, l. 180) and destroyed the land with a terrible burning storm.[22] Also in this text, Gibil is defined as 'the purifier'.[23] Finally, in Mesopotamian literary texts, the fury typical of the hero is described as a fire that burns inside the warrior.[24]

Fire in the Kings' War

Concerning the deeds of the Mesopotamian kings in war, there are no references of use of fire in the inscriptions of the Akkadian, Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.[25] Normally, the attack and the destruction are rather compared to a flood, and the long-lasting *topos* of cities turned into ruin hills or of heaps of corpses are employed. Most likely, fire was used in battle, as other types of sources testify. For example, according to some letters written to Zimri-Lim of Mari, fire was employed to destroy siege machines or to set alight grain during raids into the enemy country.[26]

20 *Ibid*.: 166, l. 83, 94. His fifty-headed mace Šar-ur 'set fire to the mountains', *ibid*.: 170, l. 255.

21 For example, in the *Lament for Sumer and Urim*, Enlil decreed a storm 'blazing like the mouth of a fire'; 'Fire approached Ninmar in the shrine' (see Michalowski 1989: 47, l. 168, 171). In the *Lament for Eridu*, the temple is fired (see ETCSL, *The Lament for Eridug,* segment A from Ur, l. 8-14). In the *Lament for Uruk*, the deluge sent by Enlil is described as follows: 'it's back shall be flames… The glint of its eyes shall be lightning that flashes far like the Anzu bird. Its mouth shall rage – a blazing fire that extends as far as the netherworld. Its tongue shall be an inferno, raining embers, that sunders the Land…' (see Green 1984: 269-270, l. 3.5; 3.7-3.9); 'The deluge…like the Firegod' (see *ibid*.: 272, l. 4.6). In this poem, we also find a description of the destruction of the city by fire (see *ibid*.: 274, l. 5.12-5.5.14; *ibid*.: 267, l. 2.15'; *ibid*.: 273, l. 4.28).

22 See Samet 2009: 87, l. 187-188, 193, 202. For other mentions of destruction by fire, see *ibid.*: 80, l. 79 ('Ur burns in wailing'); *ibid*.: 89, l. 228 (people consumed by fire); *ibid*.: 92, l. 274 (burnt plain).

23 See *ibid*.: 90, l. 240-241: 'In all the storehouses abounding in the Land fires were kindled. At its watercourses Gibil, the purifier, did his work'.

24 For example, in a text celebrating the battle between Naram-Sin and the king of Apishal, the Akkadian hero is defined as a 'furious king' and 'the fire that burns inside the hero' is mentioned (see text 12 in Westenholz 1997: 173-187). When Naram-Sin calms down, we read: 'the burning fire within the warrior was extinguished' (see *ibid*.: 185, l. 11). The king of Apishal asking Naram-Sin for mercy says: 'Your radiance is fire' (see *ibid*.: 183, l. 1).

25 For these periods, the texts that have been checked are principally those published in Frayne 1990; 1993; 1997.

Only from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, we encounter references to the use of fire in battle and fire metaphors in royal inscriptions.[27] Fire represents the violence and the power of the king.[28] For example, Shalmaneser I (1273-1244 BC) is described as a 'valiant hero…, whose aggressive battle flashes like a flame' (Grayson 1987: 183, l. 12-13). Tiglath-Pileser I is defined as a 'darting and furious flame, deluge in battle' (Grayson 1991: 23, col. v, l. 42-43) and as a 'splendid flame which covers the hostile land like a rain storm' (*ibid.*: 33, l. 15). Adad-narari II (911-891 BC) claims: 'I am who is inflamed against the evil and the wicked, I scorch like the god Girra'.[29] He also states, similarly to Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC),[30] 'at the onset of my campaign the enemy weapons melt as in a furnace' (*ibid.*: 148, l. 22; *ibid*.: 157, l. 11'-12'.). Sennacherib (705-681 BC) is defined as 'the flame that consumes the insubmissive' (Luckenbill 1989b: 115, 128, 140).

Aside from literary images, in their war accounts from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, kings also claim to have destroyed, burnt and turned the attacked cities into hills of ruin.[31] Usually fire is not mentioned during the battle: the towns seem to have

26 See Heimpel 2003: 300, text 26 318; *ibid*.: 458, text 27 141; *ibid*.: 511, text A.3669; Hamblin 2006: 231-2. To give other examples, in a lament, Lugalzagesi is said to have burnt the temples of Lagash (*ibid*.: 65); in his Law Code, Hammurabi summons Nergal to burn his enemy 'with his great overpowering weapon like a raging fire in a reed thicket' (*ibid.*: 179).

27 In the beginning of the annals of the Assyrian kings, Girra is not mentioned among the great gods, except for a little evidence in the texts of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC, see Grayson 1991: 47, text 6) and Assur-bel-kala (1076-1058 BC). In the introduction to his Annals, Assur-bel-kala is defined as 'the one who disintegrates all enemy lands (with the fire of) Girru' (*ibid*.: 95, l. 6). The name of Girra does not recur in the curses at the end of the annals either, and we cannot find curses related to the destruction of the enemy by means of fire. The image of the burning enemy recurs sometimes in blessing formulas. For example, Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) is said to have given Adad the tribute he received from his subdued enemies in return for his life, 'for the scorching' of his enemies (see Grayson 1996: 60, l. 35; similar blessing in *ibid*.: 154, l. 6).

28 For example, Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur (first half of the 8th century BC) claims to have fallen upon the enemy like a blazing fire (see Frame 1995: 296, l. ii 5; *ibid*.: 302, l. ii 10'; *ibid*.: 310, l. ii 10'; *ibid*.: 312, l. 3'). Shalmaneser III states that he brought about destruction like fire, see Grayson 1996: 60, l. 20; *ibid*.: 118, l. 9. Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) describes how even his message burns his enemy like a flame (see Leichty 2011: 81, l. i 1). Fire can also represent the violent confusion of battle. For example, in the account of a campaign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 BC) in Elam, we read: 'Fire flared up between' the two kings (see Frame 1995: 34, l. i 30). Fire can represent the difficult scenario the king and his army had to face: 'during the whole time (of the campaign) the blistering heat burnt like fire and the very roadways scorched like flames' (*ibid.*: l. i 17).

29 Grayson 1991: 148, l. 18; *ibid*.: 157, l. 4'-5'. He also says that he encircled the moat of an enemy city with his warriors like a flame (*ibid*.: 151, l. 66).

30 '(The king) at the attack of whose angry weapons all lands convulse, writh, melt as though in a furnace' (*ibid.*: 308, l. 14).

31 For examples in the texts of Adad-Narari I (1305-1274 BC), see Grayson 1987: 136, l. 35-36, 50-51; of Shalmaneser I (1273-1244 BC), see *ibid.*: 183, l. 37-38; and 184, l. 87; of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243-1207 BC), see *ibid*.: 236, l. 16-18: 3; of Tiglath-Pileser I, see Grayson 1991: 14, col. i. l. 94; col. ii, l. 1; *ibid.*: 15, l. 34-35; *ibid.*: 16, l. 82; *ibid.*: 17, col. iii, l. 11; *ibid.*: 18, l. 64; *ibid.*: 19, l. 83, col. iv, l. 3; *ibid.*: 20, l. 25; *ibid.*: 22, col. v, l. 2-3; *ibid.*: 23, col. v, l. 59-63, 72; *ibid.*: 24, l. 97; *ibid.*: 24, l. 10; *ibid.*: 43, l. 49; *ibid.*: 54, l. 51; *ibid.*: 60, l. 8'; of Assur-bel-kala see *ibid.*: 92, l. 33'; *ibid.*: 94; of Assur-dan II (934-912 BC), see *ibid.*: 133, l. 14-15, 27; *ibid.*: 134, l. 34, 44; *ibid.*: 136, l. 11'; of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC), see Luckenbill 1989a: 269, 272-4.

been set alight after the capture and the gathering of the booty. Considering that the surrendering cities are said to have been spared, their being set ablaze seems to have been a sort of punishment for the insubordinate ones.

From Adad-narari II onwards, we find references to the burning of enemy cities in association with the destruction of their harvest and gardens.[32] We must remember how such descriptions contrast with the building activities and the planting of trees in Assyria, narrated at the end of the annals. Since the times of Tukulti-Ninurta I, the kings sometimes affirm to have even burnt the enemy soldiers, captives and the people of the conquered cities.[33] Ashurnasirpal II, for example, claims to have rained down flames upon the city Pitura and then to have burnt many enemy soldiers and their adolescents as a burnt offering.[34] He also states that he caused flaming arrows to rain down upon the princes of all cities so that they would ever revere his command and praise his lordship.[35]

With this king, we also have iconographic sources for the use of fire in war. In a slab from the North-West Palace of Nimrud, an Assyrian soldier near the gate of a besieged city and an enemy on the top of a tower are depicted holding a torch (Fig. 1a, see Matthiae 1996: fig. 2.1). In another relief (Fig. 1b, see Matthiae 1996: fig. 2.6; Budge 1914: pl. XXIV), torches are thrown from the wall of the city under attack, to set the Assyrian battering ram alight, while water pours through pipes onto it from the cab of the siege engine.

32 For evidence of burnt cities and reaped harvest in the texts of Adad-narari II, see Grayson 1991: 152, l. 93, 96; of Tukulti-Ninurta II (890-884 BC), see *ibid.*: 171, l. 2; *ibid.*: 173, l. 36; *ibid.*: 178, l. 125; of Shamshi-Adad V (824- 811 BC), see Grayson 1993: 184, l. 30; *ibid.*: 185, l. ii 59, iii 2, 19; *ibid.*: 186, l. iii 36, 44; *ibid.*: 187, l. iv 11, 18; *ibid.*: 188, l. iv 22, 36; *ibid.*: 190, l. ii 16', 23', iii 37'; *ibid.*: 193, l. 5', 19', 28'.

33 For evidence in the texts of Tukulti-Ninurta I, see Grayson 1987: 236, l. 43-45; of Ashurnasirpal II, see Grayson 1991: 201, l. i 108; related to Nabu-shuma-ishkun (760-748 BC), see Frame 1995: 34, l. iii 12'-13'; for evidence in Tiglath-Pileser III's texts, see Luckenbill 1989a: 271. Sargon II claims to have lit a king with a torch (see Luckenbill 1989b: 61).

34 For evidence in Ashurnasirpal II's texts, see Grayson 1991: 201, l. i 109, 116; *ibid.*: 202, l. ii 1, 2; *ibid.*: 203, l. ii 19; *ibid.*: 204, l. ii 43; *ibid.*: 206, l. ii 58; *ibid.*: 210, l. ii 106, 108, 110; *ibid.*: 244, l. ii 62-63; *ibid.*: 245, l. iii 13-14; *ibid.*: 246, l. iii 50; *ibid.*: 250, l. iv 70-72; *ibid.*: 251, l. iv 83; *ibid.*: 260, l. 73, 75-77. For evidence in Shalmaneser III's texts, see Grayson 1996: 14, l. 17.

35 See Grayson 1991: 225, l. 22. Indeed Ashurnasirpal II is defined as the Sun god of all people (see for example *ibid.*: 284, l. 8). For evidence of burnt enemy cities in Ashurnasirpal II's texts, see *ibid.*: 197, i 54; *ibid.*: 198, l. i 66, 72; *ibid.*: 203, l. 21; *ibid.*: 204, l. ii 38, 42-43; *ibid.*: 205, l. ii 45, 49; *ibid.*: 206, l. ii 56, 56, 59; *ibid.*: 207, l. ii 70, 74; *ibid.*: 208, l. 84; *ibid.*: 209, l. ii 93, 95; *ibid.*: 210, l. ii 112; *ibid.*: 214, l. iii 31, 32; *ibid.*: 215, l. iii 38, 44; *ibid.*: 216, l. iii 54; *ibid.*: 218, l. iii 83-84; *ibid.*: 220, l. iii 99, 101; *ibid.*: 241, l. i 77; *ibid.*: 242, l. i 87, ii 2, 5; *ibid.*: 244, l. ii 69; *ibid.*: 245, l. iii 1, 12, 18; *ibid.*: 246, l. iii 26, 46, 49, 55; *ibid.*: 247, l. iii 82; *ibid.*: 248, l. iii 94-95; *ibid.*: 249, l. iv 24-25, 30; *ibid.*: 250, l. iv 78; *ibid.*: 251, l. iv 89; *ibid.*: 256, l. 32'; *ibid.*: 259, l. 54, 57, 60; *ibid.*: 260, l. 75; 79; *ibid.*: 267, 7'.

In the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III,[36] different enemy cities are represented alight, sometimes during a siege, such as, for example, Sugunia (Fig. 2a).[37] In another band, enemy soldiers are represented fighting against the Assyrians, while, on the other side of the city, only high flames come up from the walls (Fig. 2b, see Schachner 2007: 294, Taf. 2 b). In other cases, the cities are depicted in flames after their defeat. Similarly as in the textual sources (see Grayson 1996: 50, l. 12'-13'; *ibid.*: 54, l. iv 4; *ibid.*: 78, l. 130'; *ibid.*: 87, l. 51, 53), the burning of enemy land is represented along with the destruction of its plants (Fig. 2c, see Schachner 2007: 294, Taf. 2 b). In other registers, despairing women are depicted on the top of the burning defeated city wall (Fig. 2d);[38] high flames come up from the walls of Arṣašku (Fig. 2e).[39] In the representation of Qarqar in flames, we might recognize water on the ground, maybe representing destruction by flooding (Fig. 2f).[40] Another town is depicted as burning with detached heads on its walls and impaled bodies around it, while Assyrian soldiers are mutilating captives (Fig. 2g).[41] In Shalmaneser III's inscriptions (similarly as in the case of some other Assyrian kings), we find some suggestions that fire could represent the power of the king, in the form of a terrifying brightness (*melammû*/*namurratu*) that makes the enemies escape or surrender.[42] In fact, the mention of burnt cities is often associated with the image of the god's or king's radiance, or of the splendor of the weapons. For example, in the account of the siege of Til-Barsip, where Shalmaneser III claims to have cut down its gardens and rained flaming arrows upon it, we read: '(Its king) became afraid in the face of the flash of

36 For evidence of burnt enemy cities in Shalmaneser III's texts, see Grayson 1996: 8, l. 17, 23; *ibid.*: 10, l. 62'; *ibid.*: 14, l. 20; *ibid.*: 15, l. 31; *ibid.*: 16, l. 48; *ibid.*: 18, l. 18, 20; *ibid.*: 20, l. 43, 47, 53; *ibid.*: 21, l. 56; *ibid.*: 25, l. 95; *ibid.*: 29, l. ii 4, 6; *ibid.*: 31, l. 6; *ibid.*: 34, l. i 34; *ibid.*: 35, l. 48; *ibid.*: 36, l. 51, 54; *ibid.*: 37, l. ii 36, 56, 59; *ibid.*: 38, l. ii 71; *ibid.*: 39, l. iii 41; *ibid.*: 46, l. 21', 30'; *ibid.*: 47, l. 36'; *ibid.*: 48, l. 50', 20''; *ibid.*: 54, l. 6; *ibid.*: 60, l. 27, 33; *ibid.*: 68, l. 116, 124, 130; *ibid.*: 69, l. 138, 158; *ibid.*: 70, l. 168, 180; *ibid.*: 71, l. 185, 189; *ibid.*: 76, l. 71', 73', 76'; *ibid.*: 78, l. 132'; *ibid.*: 79, l. 159', 166'; *ibid.*: 80, l. 193', 200', 224'; *ibid.*: 81, l. 240'; *ibid.*: 82, l. 289'; *ibid.*: 83, l. 307', 328', 333'; *ibid.*: 84, l. 340'; *ibid.*: 103, l. 15; *ibid.*: 104, l. 37, 39.

37 See Schachner 2007: 293, Taf. 1 b. For the account of the burning of Sugunia and of the cities in its environs, see Grayson 1996: 9, l. 33; *ibid.*: 14, l. 25.

38 Maybe Tyrus or Sidon or Khazazu. See Schachner 2007: 295, Taf. 3 a.

39 *Ibid.*: 299, Taf. 7 a. For the written account of this episode, see Grayson 1996: 20, l. 53; *ibid.*: 29, l. 6; *ibid.*: 35, l. 73; *ibid.*: 45, l. 4'; *ibid.*: 104, l. 39.

40 See Schachner 2007: 301, Taf. 9 a (Adâ, Parga, Qarqar). For the written account of the burning of this city and of others in Syria, see Grayson 1996: 23, l. 89, 90.

41 Maybe Tigris or Kulisi. See Schachner 2007: 302, Taf. 10 a.

42 The terrifying splendor of gods, kings, weapons are mentioned in literary, religious, royal texts already in the Ur III period until the Neo-Babylonian period. Considering the huge amount of evidence, only a few examples are here recorded. Adad-narari III is defined as the 'warrior of the Anunnaku gods, who is bedecked with luminosity, who rides the great storms and is clothed with fierce brilliance, who lays low the evil' (Grayson 1996: 208, l. 3-5). He says that his 'awesome radiance overwhelmed them (Hatti people) and they submitted to' him (*ibid.*:, 208-209, l. 16-17). In his texts the awesome radiance that submitts the enemies could be the one of Assur, too (*ibid.*: 213, l. 17). The terrible splendor of the gods or of royalty that overcome the enemy are also mentioned in Ashurbanipal's (668-626 BC) inscriptions (see Luckenbill 1989b: 293, 305, 313, 333, 395). For a discussion about the concept of divine splendor, see Cassin (1968), in particular chapter VI about the relation between *melammû* and the royal function. See also Emelianov 2010.

my weapons and my lordly *melammû*, and abandoned his city' (see Grayson 1996: 21, l. 68). And again, the chief of Shalmaneser III's army 'burnt their cities, annihilated their land like a flood, thus spreading the king's radiant *melamme* fearfulness over them' (*ibid.*: 82, l. 290'; *ibid.*: 83, l. 334'). In another text, the destruction by fire of Til-Barsip is attributed to the gods (*ibid.*: 86, l. 8), and in the passage linked to the attack against Urartu, there is this interesting direct speech: 'Let the god Nergal march before you, let the god Girra come behind' (*ibid.*: 86, l. 29), which seems to be saying that 'after the battle, the fire'.

The tradition continues with Sargon II,[43] who claims to have set fire to the timbers of the roofs of the houses and to have burnt enemy villages like brush and covered the sky with their smoke, like a cyclone (Luckenbill 1989b: 85-6, 88, 90-2). It is noteworthy that, similarly, in a fragment of an incantation text of the *Maqlû* series Shamash is asked to overwhelm sorcerers through his fiery red light that burns them like a furnace so that their smoke could cover the heavens (see Abusch 2002: 74, l. 75). Sargon claims to have set the enemies' crops and the trees in their gardens and forests aflame (see Luckenbill 1989b: 85-6, 90-2). In the reliefs decorating his Royal Palace in Khorsabad, there is some evidence for the use of fire in battle, such as in the representations of the siege of Pazashi (Fig. 3a),[44] Kindau (Fig. 3b, see Matthiae 1996: 122, fig. 6.14), Kisheshim/Khisassu (Fig. 3c, see *ibid.*, fig. 6.12), Qarqar (Fig. 3d)[45] and Bit Bagaia (Fig. 3e, see *ibid.*: 122, fig. 6.13), where Assyrian soldiers are setting fire to the city gates and flames are rising from the towers.

Sennacherib also claims to have turned the captured cities into a mass of flames and to have covered the sky like a hurricane with the smoke of the conflagration;[46] although there are no scenes with burning towns in his reliefs.[47] Esarhaddon similarly claims to have conquered, plundered, demolished, and burnt hundreds of cities.[48] For example, in the stele of Zinçirli, commemorating the invasion of Egypt, we read: 'the assault of the king's fierce battle is a blazing flame, a restless fire' (Leichty 2011: 184, l. rev. 14; *ibid.*: 189, l. 2'-3'). Indeed, he claims to have burnt Memphis (*ibid.*: 185, l. 41-43a).

In Ashurbanipal's accounts,[49] destruction by means of fire is also associated with the fulfilment of omens and curses linked to oaths.[50] For example, in the context of the

43 For evidence of burning enemy cities in Sargon II's texts see, for example, Luckenbill 1989b: 3, 5, 6, 8, 20, 28, 30, 35, 79. Also his viceroy in Cilicia burnt cities (*ibid.*: 21-22, 36).

44 See Matthiae 1996: 130, fig. 6.24; Invernizzi 1992: 238, fig. 443; Russell 1999: 117. The city has been identified also with Kisheshlu, another town mentioned in the annals (see Luckenbill 1989b: 7, 29, 67).

45 Matthiae 1996: 123, fig. 6.16. For the written account of this episode, see Luckenbill 1989b: 27.

46 For evidence of burnt enemy cities in Sennacherib's texts, see Luckenbill 1989b: 117-8, 122-4, 132, 135, 141, 144-5, 147, 152, 154-5, 157, 198.

47 In the scene representing the siege of Lachish, torches fall down upon the Assyrians (Fig. 4). See Reade 1999: 67, fig. 71; Invernizzi 1992: 248-9.

48 For evidence of burnt enemy cities and use of fire in battle in Esarhaddon's texts, see Leichty 2011: 18, l. 53; *ibid.*: 29, l. ii 12; *ibid.*: 37, l. ii 24'; *ibid.*: 42, l. i' 9'; *ibid.*: 82-83, l. ii 1-13; *ibid.*: 85, l. iv 1'-10'; *ibid.*: 155, l. 27; *ibid.*: 159, l. 25; *ibid.*: 161, l. 25; *ibid.*: 176, l. 13.

49 For evidence of burnt enemy cities in Ashurbanipal's texts, see Luckenbill 1989b: 299, 307-8, 327, 355. In his accounts, there is also evidence for the cult of Girra (see *ibid.*: 301-2).

50 Similar presages are present also in literary texts. See, for example, the omen of Ishtar for Naram-Sin in Westenholz 1997: 323-327, l. 129-145.

revolt plotted by Shamash-shum-ukin, the omen was: 'to those who plot evil against Ashurbanipal, and instigate hostility, I (Sin) will give as gift an evil death. Through the swift (thrust) of the iron dagger, through conflagration of fire, through famine and the outbreak of the plague, I will bring their lives to an end' (Luckenbill 1989b: 302). Indeed, according to the report of the campaign, the great gods cast Shamash-shum-ukin into a conflagration and destroyed his life (*ibid.*: 303-304). Ashurbanipal is said to have set the tents of the Arabs (*ibid.*: 314, 338) who had not kept their oaths (*ibid.*: 367-368) on fire, as depicted in a slab from the North Palace of Nineveh (Fig. 5a, see Invernizzi 1992: 266, fig. 484). In the account of this campaign, Girra is also mentioned in the list of the gods at the side of the Assyrian king (see Luckenbill 1989b: 338). Moreover, it is said that 'Ishtar, who is clothed with fire and bears aloft (a crown) of awful splendor, rained fire over Arabia'.[51] In the account of his 7th campaign against Elam, another omen is recorded. A seer dreamt of Ishtar in her warrior aspect promising the Assyrian king her aid against Teumman, while 'before her a flame burst forth' (*ibid.*: 332-333). Ashurbanipal claims to have set towns and sanctuaries in Elam on fire (*ibid.*: 310, 394). In a relief from the North Palace in Nineveh, Assyrian soldiers are destroying the walls of the Elamite city Hamanu while high flames are represented on the top (Fig. 5b).[52] In another slab, the gateway of an Egyptian town is set alight by an Assyrian soldier during the siege (Fig. 5c).[53] Finally, also Neo-Babylonian kings, according to the Chronicles, burnt towns.[54]

Conclusions

To sum up, in Mesopotamia fire was actually employed during battle: to burn the gates of the besieged cities to permit the assailants to enter; to set war machines on fire; to destroy the enemy towns; to kill the foes. At any rate, the occurrence of fire in textual and visual sources linked to the representation of war also suggests to us other meanings.

First of all, destruction by means of fire belongs, similarly as by flood and storms, to long-lasting imagery of Mesopotamia. In this regard, we could consider the fire image in our textual and iconographic sources as a traditional literary *topos* employed according to aesthetic criteria. At the same time, at the root of this consuetude there must have been some sort of beliefs. If gods in religious, literary sources, employ fire to punish, to devastate, to purify, to set a renewed condition, most probably these are also the intentions of the kings, at least for justificatory or celebratory reasons. Thus,

51 See Luckenbill 1989b: 318. A mention of burning flames linked to Ishtar is recorded also in the account of his 2nd campaign against Elam (*ibid.*: 358).

52 Slab A from Room S' in the Northern Palace in Niniveh (Matthiae 1998: 166). In slab 3 from Room F, the same siege is represented without flames.

53 Maybe Memphis or Tebes (Reade 1999: 87, fig. 104).

54 For evidence of fire actions linked to the years of Nabopolassar, see Glassner 2005: 217, 225; of Nebuchadnezzar: *ibid.*: 225; of Neriglissar: *ibid.*: 233; of Nabonidus: *ibid.*: 317.

destruction by means of fire in war could be a sign of the fault of the enemies and an image of their just punishment by the gods through the hand of the king.

Moreover, fire burning enemy land could symbolize the power of the king on earth, his terrible *melammû* that forces the foes to surrender. Just as in magical rituals, fire is used in war by the kings against evil, to annihilate the unsubmissive and dangerous people who do not respect the divine and royal will. After the enemy's defeat, the situation of conflict is transformed into a new condition of justice, order and peace for the well-being of the land. In this regard, burning the enemy could also be interpreted as a form of sacrifice to the gods by the kings.

Fire, in conclusion, is at the same time a symbol and a tool of the gods' and kings' cosmic power, an ideal and real manifestation of their supernatural force destined to restore order and peace. Fire is a symbol of their vital and mortal power. It is their *melammû*, their terrifying burning splendor that keeps people in their proper position as subjects. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that scenes with burning towns recur only in the art of the Assyrian period: in fact these images, associated with the concept of *melammû* as an aggressive, fearful, divine and heroic quality, well represent the ideology of Assyrian kingship.

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a

b

Fig. 1: (Ashurnasirpal II).

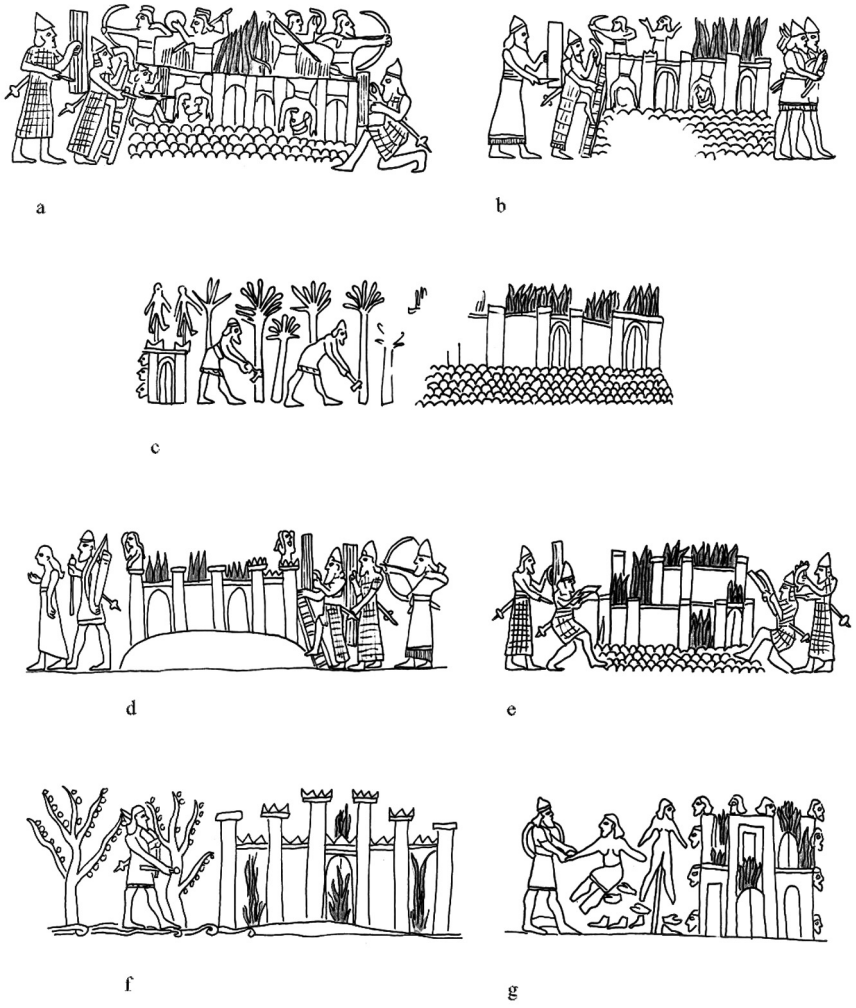

Fig. 2: (Shalmaneser III).

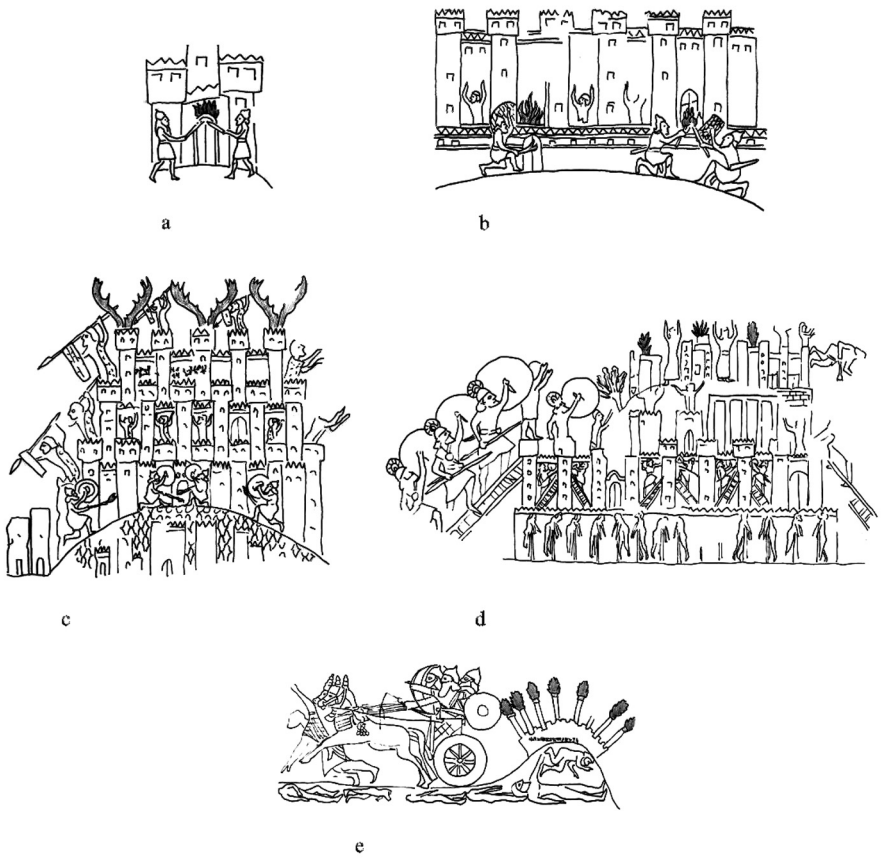

Fig. 3: (Sargon II).

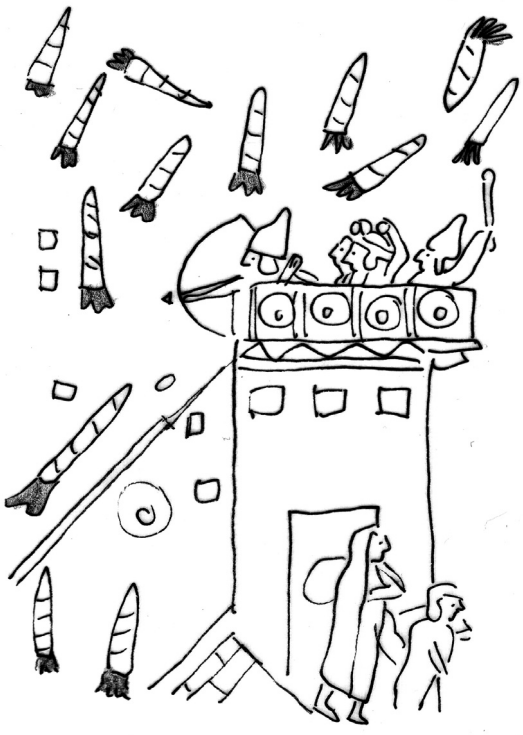

Fig. 4: (Sennacherib).

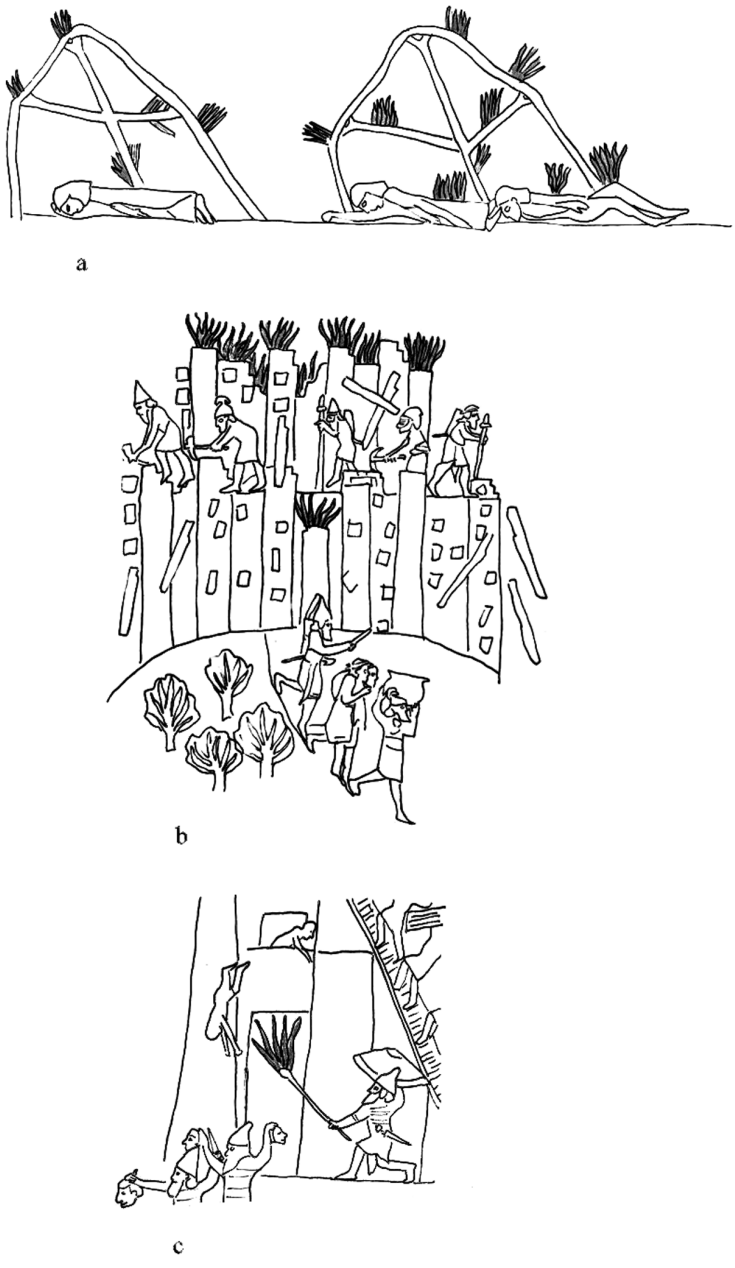

Fig. 5: (Ashurbanipal).