

## THE ZU BIRD.<sup>1</sup>

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**A**BOUT three thousand years ago there was current in Mesopotamia a tale to the effect that the god Zu became for a time the Lord of the World by a theft, as bold as it was easy, of the symbols of power from the god Enlil to whom they properly belonged. We shall have more to say about that story later. Meanwhile it suggests a few thoughts. First, it is one of those stories, of which there are many, which have no parallel in the Old Testament or in other Semitic traditions; just as in Mesopotamian literature there are no parallels to the Biblical stories of the Temptation of Eve, the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel. This detail has its own contribution to make to the discussion of Mesopotamian influence on the cultures of other Semites. Second: since Zu is usually described as "the Zu bird" some may be tempted to class it with other stories of birds, beasts and animals so frequent in the folk-lore of peoples. But the story here is not a nature myth such as is found among less developed peoples; there are no such stories extant from Mesopotamia. Nor is it of the kind of story known in the "higher mythologies" wherein "such bird and beast stories frequently lose their nature-colouring entirely and become frankly and powerfully human and even pseudo-historical".<sup>2</sup> The truth is that it cannot be properly called a bird story at all, for Zu was more than a bird. It will be proposed later in this paper that Zu really belongs to that dusty underworld where the living dead have wings like birds.

Bilingual texts, in Sumerian and Accadian, of the first mil-

<sup>1</sup> A lecture given in the John Rylands Library on the 12th November, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. L. R. Farnell, *Value and Methods of Mythologic Study* in *Proc. Brit. Ac.*, vol. ix.); he cites the collection of legends called "The Transformations" by Antoninus Liberalis.

lenium, identify the god known to the Semites in Mesopotamia as Zu with the god known to the Sumerians of the third millennium as the "divine Im-dugud bird", i.e. bird of the "heavy storm". We must therefore begin our investigations in the third millennium B.C., using as our sources material of the Sumerian age, both literary and artistic.

We take first the account of a dream<sup>1</sup> which Gudea, prince of Lagash, had, c. 2300 B.C. He saw a man of giant size, wearing a crown such as a god would wear. The man was, in fact, the high deity of Lagash, Ningirsu. As Gudea saw him he was attended by "the divine storm bird at his side, the storm at his feet, and a lion on his right and on his left".

For the moment we shall defer the description of Im-dugud which third-millennium artistic remains provide, and keep to literary material. From before Gudea's time we have to hand only onomastic<sup>2</sup> material, from Ur, Shuruppak and Lagash. From this we learn that Im-dugud is, in writing, defined as a god and as a bird; that there were temples of Im-dugud at Shuruppak and Lagash, and that Im-dugud was an element of theophorous names. Onomastic material after Gudea's time, of the third Dynasty of Ur, is consonant with earlier material. But thereafter the name Im-dugud is not found on texts other than the two epics of Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh.

The Epic of Lugalbanda dates back to the Sumerian age though the purely Sumerian version we have to hand cannot be earlier than the end of the third millennium. All that we need say of that epic here is that it opens with an account of the encounter of Lugalbanda with Im-dugud and his wife, his son and his young, in a place described as "a mountain in a far-off land".

This Epic mentions one detail which is instructive. It says that Im-dugud "lifted up *am* (Semitic *rēmu*) whilst still alive, with his hands, and carried it on his back when it was dead".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gudea, *Cyl. A.*, iv. 14-vi. 13.

<sup>2</sup> For Fara texts, see Deimel and Jestin; for Ur, see Burrows, *Archaic Texts*; for Ur III texts, Schneider, *Götternamen*. No point in giving details here.

<sup>3</sup> Chiera, *Sumerian Epics and Myths*, no. 1, col. ii, ll. 4-5; CT. 15, plate 43, ll. 5-10.

*Am* is usually translated wild bull,<sup>1</sup> but bison<sup>2</sup> and rhinoceros<sup>3</sup> have been suggested. Whichever translation is adopted, there can be no doubt of the great strength attributed to the divine storm-bird.

From the other Epic of Sumerian origin of which a fragment of the Sumerian version exists, the Epic of Gilgamesh, we have this: it is said that Gilgamesh cuts down a tree of which it is said "at its foot the serpent had made its nest; at its top the divine Im-dugud bird had put his young, and in the midst Lilith had built a house".<sup>4</sup> Gilgamesh slew the serpent, but Lilith escapes and Im-dugud goes away to "the mountain" taking his young with him. Here we need note only the company which Im-dugud so to say, keeps. This recalls another line<sup>5</sup> in Gudea texts in which Im-dugud and the serpent are associated.

From texts we now pass to artistic representations of Im-dugud in the Sumerian period. Some of these have long been known, others have been discovered more recently.<sup>6</sup> They have been found at various sites in Lower Mesopotamia: Lagash, al Ubaid, Khafaja, Abu Kemal, Tell Asmar; and at Susa, chief city of ancient Elam. On panels, vases, statues, pendants, and as figurines, the Im-dugud bird is shown alone, or grasping an animal (lion or gazelle) by either talon, or with wings outstretched over animals (stags or lions). Everywhere the Im-dugud bird

<sup>1</sup> Of the strength of the wild bull and of its place in religion, see Gilbert Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, c. 1. In Mesopotamian literature the *am rēmu* is often a term of comparison; for example: the god Enlil like a furious *rēmu*; Gilgamesh fastened himself on his people like a *rēmu*; Humbaba raged like a wounded *rēmu*, etc., etc.

<sup>2</sup> Thureau Danguin, *RA.*, xxiv, p. 200; bison remains found, see Contenau *Manuel d'Archéologie Orientale*, vol. i, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> G. A. Barton in *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research*, 1926, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Gadd, *R.A.*, xxx (1933), p. 130; see Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, pp. 33 f. There is no foundation for Langdon's view (*JRAS*, 1932, p. 937, n. 3) that there existed a myth of Gilgamesh and Zu.

<sup>5</sup> Gudea, *Cyl. A.*, 27, 19; *SAK*, p. 118. But how translate? For a Semitic text linking Zu with a serpent cp. *CT.* xxii plate 48, obverse 5.

<sup>6</sup> H. Frankfort, *l.c.*, *infra*, and Iraq, no. 1. Reproductions of Im-dugud figure also in King's *History of Sumer and Accad*, and Hall's *A season's work at Ur*, p. 258.

is shown as having wings like those of an eagle, and a head like that of a lion. And it is usual to describe him by some such phrase as "lion-headed eagle".<sup>1</sup> Later I shall give my reasons for questioning this description in respect of Zu.

At first, when the only artistic representation of the divine Im-dugud bird known was that found at Lagash, and rightly connected with mention of him in the dream of the ruler of Lagash, Gudea, it was thought that the divine storm-bird was a symbol peculiar to the god Ningirsu and his city of Lagash. But now that the symbol has been found elsewhere associated with other gods that view has been abandoned. The present opinion is that Ningirsu and the other deities are forms of a fertility deity.<sup>2</sup>

Were it not that the Semites in Mesopotamia identified the

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we may here recall that Daniel's "head upon his bed" had visions of "four great beasts," of which the first "was like a lion and had eagle's wings," which commentators have identified as "the winged lion from Nimrud and Babylon, and the type of the lordliest of creatures". Gudea (see *supra*), in his dream, saw the divine Im-dugud bird which, we know, had eagle's wings, and a head that looks like that of a lion. Not that Daniel had a vision of the divine storm-bird. But maybe something less unlike than the winged lion which commentators have preferred. In any case the phrase "lordliest of creatures" may not unjustly be described as an anachronism.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Thureau-Dangin, *RA.*, xxiv. 119. H. Frankfort writes: "a pre-Sargonid god of fertility, worshipped throughout the land, under a variety of epithets, was everywhere represented in his war-like aspect by the lion-headed eagle" (Early Dynastic Sculptured Maceheads, in *Miscellanea Orientalia*, Rome, 1935, p. 118). As to that, I can't help asking why it is assumed here that the lion-headed eagle is a symbol of a war-like character? If Ningirsu is to be associated with fertility, and so the giving of life, the following from Egypt is suggestive. In ancient Egypt in scenes depicted in tomb and coffin we find a human headed bird with human arms "hovering over the mummy and extending to its nostrils in one hand the figure of a swelling sail, the hieroglyph for wind or breath, and in the other, the so-called crux ansata, or symbol of life", Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 55 f. There may be nothing in this, but it seems to me that a bird hovering, even a bird touching animals, is a tame expression of warlike character, and, in some representations, the "victims" (?) seem quite unconcerned. By the way, in China birds embody vital breath, and the great Taoist, Lu Puh-wei says "Collected in birds, it enables them to fly and soar" (J. J. M. de Groot, *Religion in China*, p. 159). I owe these fragments of possibly irrelevant learning to the late Professor Maurice Canney, of Manchester University. The use of the divine Im-dugud bird for pendants and figurines would fit in with the fertility idea, though there is a way out of that too.

divine Im-dugud bird with Zu, it is not likely that we should have identified them. For the material concerning the divine storm-bird which has been preserved to us from the Sumerian third millennium, in no detail corresponds to or even suggests the activities of Zu as they are recorded or hinted at in later Semitic literature. And, in respect of art, there is not a single representation which recalls unmistakably the figure of the divine Im-dugud bird which was so well known during the Sumerian age. We must not make too much of that fact which may be explained by the accident that the desired Sumerian texts or Semitic art pieces still lie buried and await a lucky spade. But at present the matter stands as I have said just now. The Sumerian divine Im-dugud bird gives no hint of the Semitic Zu bird. Yet the Semites identified the two.

The Semites described Zu as "doer of evil, the one who raises the head of evil". No other divine being is so described, so it would seem that Zu's characteristic feature, if not his nature, is evil. To describe him as maleficent merely would seem to be an understatement.

The only evil which Zu did, to our knowledge, is described in the story<sup>1</sup> to which I referred at the beginning of this paper. What happened was this: once, when in attendance on the god Enlil, Zu sees the tokens of Enlil's power: his crown of sovereignty, his robe of divinity, and the tablets of destiny; and seeing, covets what they signify, saying: "I'll take those tablets of fate of the gods, get hold of the oracles of all the gods, set up my throne and be lord of decrees, and be ruler of all the Igigi (the gods of the upper world)". It was the dawn, and Enlil, minus his crown, is pouring out pure water. Zu, who had been waiting at the entrance of the god's rest-room, took the Tablets of Destiny, Enlil's sovereignty, and the power to make decrees, and fled away to "his mountain".

In substance this is an old story: the temporary triumph of the forces of disorder. It is the burden of several other stories of which the *Enuma Eliš* or Creation Story is the most

<sup>1</sup> *CT*, xv, plates 39-41. There are occasional references to Zu in Semitic literature but they throw no light on our subject and need not be listed here.



1. TOP LEFT: THE DIVINE IM-DUGUD BIRD. BAS-RELIEF,  
MIDDLE 3RD MILLENNIUM, FROM LAGASH.

*Louvre, Paris.*



2. BRONZE PLATE. PR-ZU-ZU DEMON OVERLOOKS UNDERWORLD BEINGS ATTENDING A DECEASED PERSON (MIDDLE REGISTER).







familiar.<sup>1</sup> There also the ensuing war is a battle for supremacy. Here a usurper has seized power over the gods. But sovereignty and all authority was not something to be seized; it was something to be conferred, for example, as a reward, as in the case of Marduk, by the gods.

The theft is a *casus belli*. But who shall engage the divine Zu in battle? Obviously not a man, for the agent and the lawlessness belong to a sphere not accessible to mankind and therefore man has no part in the vindication of right in heavenly places. Nor does Enlil, from whom sovereignty has been stolen, himself engage Zu in conflict. It is always the case, in instances of this kind, that the chief god seeks some other god, and inferior, to fight for him.<sup>2</sup>

In this instance, Enlil does not seem to have a word to say. It is Anu the heaven god who calls for volunteers, but first one and then another, when called upon, declines in spite of the offer of promotion above their brother gods. They have too much respect for Zu's might. The Mesopotamian version is damaged at this point and so hides from us the identity of the champion. But the Susa version<sup>3</sup> perhaps supports the view that he was Marduk, who, in a hymn of Aššurbanipal to Marduk, is called the one "who smashed in pieces the skull of Zu".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Schorr has suggested that late in the second millenium B.C., the priestly class, offended by the impiety of some traditional stories, got some of them dropped. Of the War-of-the-Gods type they perpetuated only those in which the gods as guardians of World Order fought against the primeval powers of Chaos, as in the story of Zu (*ZDMG*, 1935, pp. 155 ff.). This suggestion fits in with Schorr's belief that local moral ideas improved as time went on. It may be so. But concerning this particular story about Zu, there is as yet no evidence that it was in circulation at the end of the second millenium. Its own intrinsic interest was probably its main justification and there is no need to assume that the priests were fussy or revolted when the imagination of the story tellers pictured, for example, the gods, stupid with drink, creating human monsters.

<sup>2</sup> Again the best known example is the so-called Creation Story. But much of the literature arouses a suspicion that the local belief in the hierarchy of deities included something similar to the belief found elsewhere that the highest of the gods kept himself, so to say, unspotted from the world.

<sup>3</sup> Scheil, *R.A.*, xxxv, 14 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. *ZA.*, iv, 246 ff.; v, 77 ff. The opinion that the champion was Ninurta is widely current but the evidence cited is far from conclusive and is sometimes fictitious, e.g. Langdon, *Semitic Mythology*, p. 102; there is nothing in the Lugalbanda text as we have it to justify Langdon's reconstruction.

Palis<sup>1</sup> has made the story of Zu's defeat—he says, by Ninurta—part of the story read at the New Year Festival. Whether or no it was so, the Zu story does exalt Marduk and by enhancing his prestige as custodian of law and order would serve to increase popular confidence in the god. After all, the knowledge that destiny is in the hands of one's own god whom one could influence by prayer and offerings would mean much to king and people.

So far our material has yielded results which even a superficial handling of it would support. From now on we shall try to discover whether that material can tell us more about the Zu bird than the fact that he was the divine storm bird who outwitted the great god Enlil and made disorder reign in the world of gods and men.

Zu, like his alleged Sumerian original, the divine Im-dugud bird, is always the god Zu. In the Semitic story the deities speak of him as a god when they say to Enlil: "Who is like unto Zu among the gods thy sons?" His wife, Ninguenta, and his son, Enna, are also designated in writing, as deities. Yet, if, as seems certain, Zu, like Im-dugud, is the storm bird, why is he deified?

We know that the winds were personified. We are told that the great storms are from heaven, and that they are the offspring of Anu the god of heaven. Incidentally this may explain why it is Anu who calls for volunteers among the deities to avenge Enlil. Anu may have felt some responsibility for the conduct of one of her offspring. Be that as it may, the winds are also demons.

We know also that the demon winds belong to the underworld; they are its offspring. Now the Sumerian word for underworld is, amongst others, *kur* (Semitic *šadû*) mountain; also *é-kur*, house of the mountain.

Reference back to what has been said in connection with the Lugalbanda Epic, the Gilgamesh Epic, and the Semitic story, will show that Im-dugud and Zu are connected with "mountain". Especially interesting is the opening line of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Babylonian Akitu Festival*, p. 156.

Lugalbanda Epic which speaks of Lugalbanda going (?) to *kur ki-su-ud-da* (Semitic: *ana šad-i a-šar ru-u-ki*). We know that *kur* and *ki-sud*, for "mountain" and "far-off land" respectively, were names of the underworld.<sup>1</sup> It may then be conjectured that Lugalbanda's meeting with Im-dugud or Zu took place in the underworld.<sup>2</sup>

In the Semitic story, Zu steals sovereignty from Enlil. This high-god is often called "great mountain", "wind mountain", "whose top reaches to heaven and whose foundation is in the pure-water deeps". From his house (*é-kur*, above mentioned as a name for the underworld) come forth evil spirits and to his house they return. Hence we may conclude that Enlil is a god of the underworld, and not of the upper world only, and that demon winds inhabit his house, *é-kur*. The further point that the tablets of destiny which Zu stole belong to the *é-kur* seems to be implied in the Susa version<sup>3</sup> of the theft and the ensuing battle, where it is said: "May the destinies return to *é-kur*, to the father who begat thee". We know that the tablets of destiny were written in the *Ušūkinna*, the assembly room, in Enlil's abode,<sup>4</sup> when the gods were assembled for the New Year. From this concatenation of bits of evidence I hazard the guess that the story of Zu and Enlil is an underworld story.

What was Zu like in appearance? Years ago, George Smith,<sup>5</sup> who was the first to publish the Zu text wrote "Zu is called the cloud or the storm bird, the flesh-eating bird, the lion or giant bird, the bird of prey, the bird with the sharp beak". By whom Zu was so called he does not say. If we keep to the evidence of literature and art there is enough first-hand information for at least the beginnings of an answer to our question.

<sup>1</sup> Cp. Tallquist, *Sumerisch-Akkadische Namen der Totenwelt*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> True, the text goes on to speak of a mountain called Sabu. But this mountain is apparently fabulous. The Sabu mountain mentioned in Aššurnasirpal's Annals as lying east of the Tigris has no claim to be identified with the one named in the Epic.

<sup>3</sup> Scheil, *RA.* xxxv, 14 f., Tablet 3, Reverse, line 8; cp. also Craig, *RTT.* i. 39, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Im-dugud is associated with Ningirsu (see *supra*) who was "Lord of the storm of Enlil" (*SAK*, 100, 10, 2). The wife of Zu, Ninguenta, is "Utukku (a demon) of the *e-kur-ra* (Deimel, *Pantheon Bab.*, no. 2459).

<sup>5</sup> *Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1876), p. 119.

It was noted earlier that it is customary to speak of the divine Im-dugud bird as the "lion-headed eagle", a description which I promised to question. I am assuming that this Sumerian object is the Semitic Zu. Now we have a text, in the Accadian language, which purports to relate what a king experienced when, in a dream, he descended into Hades. There he saw beings with human hands, and feet of serpent; another with a lion's head, and four hands and two feet of men; another with the head of a bird, wings outstretched, and hands and feet of men.

Amongst the monsters whom he saw there, were Humuttabal, the boatman of the underworld, whose head was the head of Zu, but hands and feet were human; the wicked Utukku whose head was the head of a lion, but his hands and feet were those of Zu; and a god whose name the prince could not recall, with head, hands and feet of Zu. From this it is clear that the head, the hands and the feet of Zu were distinctive of Zu; that they were not human; and that the head was not that of a lion or, as appears from descriptions of other monsters in that place, the head of bird or bull. Hence, even though the description "lion-headed" may be true of the Sumerian artistic representations of the divine Im-dugud bird, it is more or less inaccurate if used of Zu. The natives would have agreed.

The same text makes special mention of Zu's countenance for there is reference to a man exceptional, whose "body was black as pitch, and his countenance that of Zu".<sup>1</sup>

To go further than this and attempt to identify Zu with other artistic representations is perhaps rash. But there is one representation which challenges discretion. It is the head of the "god Pazuzu,<sup>2</sup> son of the god Hanpa, lord of the wind-demons (*lilē*), the wicked god who rages violently from the mountains". Note the wicked god, or god of evil, and compare that with the phrase already quoted which describes Zu as the

<sup>1</sup> The entire text was first published by Ebeling in his *Tod und Leben*, 1931, pp. 1 ff.; the relevant lines are found on p. 5. Von Soden improved on Ebeling's effort in *ZA.*, 1936, *NF.* ix. (xliii.), pp. 1-31.

<sup>2</sup> If we may take the name Pa-zu-zu to pieces we may translate it: the wise or crafty wind (*PA. zikiku*; zu-zu, enku).

“doer of evil, the one who raises the head of evil”. And in appearance the head is not very unlike that of Im-dugud which we know from the third millennium. The complete picture is that of “the four-winged demon of the winds; half-human, half canine head; wide grinning mouth; the hands of a savage wild animal; the legs terminate in the talons of a bird of prey and are covered with feathers; the tail is that of a scorpion”. But, as I have admitted already, this is guess work.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up: Zu, the divine storm bird, was identified by the Semites with the god whom the Sumerians called the Im-dugud bird. That identification must be accepted but the evidence which we have to date from the Sumerian side contains nothing like to the story which the Semites told of Zu in the first millennium. Indeed Im-dugud is nowhere described as maleficent by the Sumerians but maleficence belongs naturally to a heavy storm wind. The Divine Im-dugud/Zu belongs, as do all wind demons, to the underworld. It was there that Enlil abode and kept the Tablets of Destiny which Zu stole from him. But Zu's distinction is not that he is hostile to men and to gods, but that by his cleverness he once became Lord of the World and could be overthrown only by a battle planned by the gods, executed by the great Marduk, with the help of a hurricane according to the Susa version. Like Milton's devil Zu captures the imagination more than does the god he outwits or the god by whom he is vanquished.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The head with the inscription on it is given in *RA*. vii. 21 ff.; cp. also more heads in *RA*. xviii., pp. 191 f. Langdon has interesting material concerning Pazuzu in *Semitic Mythology*, pp. 371 f.

<sup>2</sup> I hope, as early as possible, to publish the Lugalbanda Epic in transliteration and translation.