

Were there Seven or Fourteen Gates of the Netherworld?*

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The myth of how Nergal successfully usurped the sole authority of the netherworld from Ereškigal is known from three tablet copies:¹ the first is on a fourteenth century B. C. (Middle Babylonian) scribal exercise tablet from Tell el-Amarna;² the second is on an eighth century B. C. (Neo-Assyrian) library copy from Sultantepe;³ and, the third is on a fourth century B. C. (Seleucid) tablet fragment from Uruk.⁴ Although the EA recension is much shorter than and not as elaborate as the Sultantepe and Uruk exemplars, it narrates the same aetiological story in a nearly identical manner. However, there are also numerous differences – the most notable being the number of doorways leading into the heart of the netherworld. The Middle Babylonian (EA) version states that there were fourteen *bābū* (“gates”),⁵ whereas the Neo-Assyrian and Seleucid recensions,⁶ as well as Inanna/Ištar’s

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¹ For a translation of all three exemplars with an up-to-date bibliography, see B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature I* (1993) 410–428.

² C. Bezold/E. W. Budge, *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets in the British Museum* (1892) no. 82; O. Schroeder, *VS 12* (1915) no. 195; and, S. Izre’el, *Cun Mon.* 9 (1997) no. EA 357 p. 132–39. Line count follows J. A. Knudtzon, *VAB 2* (1915) no. 357 (= EA).

³ O. R. Gurney/J. J. Finkelstein, *STT I* (1957) no. 28; and, O. R. Gurney/P. Hulin, *STT II* (1964) nos. 113–114.

⁴ H. Hunger, *SpTU I* (1976) no. 1.

⁵ EA 357:67–74.

⁶ Sultantepe (STT) recension, i 20’–26’, iii 41’–47’, and vi 21–28; and Uruk (SpTU I) recension, iii 13’–14’, iv 1’–3’.

In both exemplars, each of the seven gates are named specifically after their gatekeepers: STT 28 iii 41’–47’ // SpTU I iii 13’–14’, iv 1–3: ^dNE-du₈, ^dKi-šár // ^dEn-ki-šár, ^dEn-da-šurim-ma, ^dEn-[URU-ul-la] // ^dNe-ru-ul-la, ^dEn-^lx¹[...] // ^dNe-ru-bàn-da, ^dEn-TUR[...] // ^dEn-du₆-kù-ga, ^dEn-nu-gi₄-gi₄ // ^dEn-nu-gi-gi.

descent into the netherworld, mention only seven.⁷ It is very puzzling why the EA edition of Nergal and Ereškigal has twice as many gates as the Sultantepe and Uruk versions of the myth as well as Inanna/Ištar's descent into Ereškigal's residence. This brief study will demonstrate that the earliest known edition of Nergal and Ereškigal upholds the Sumero-Babylonian tradition of seven gates leading into the netherworld by re-evaluating lines 67–74 of the EA recension and the meaning of the Akkadian term *bābu* (“gate, door”).

After being disrespectful to and infuriating Ereškigal, painstakingly avoiding her trusted vizier Namtar, receiving counsel and an entourage of fourteen demons from Ea, Nergal descends from the heavens into the netherworld. Soon after his arrival, he is granted admittance by Namtar and begins stationing the fourteen demons accompanying him at each and every gate leading into the heart of Ereškigal's gloomy abode. The narrative of the Middle Babylonian (EA) version, lines 67–74, reads as follows:

- 67) [...] x A² KU² ID² x (x) ŠU² x x x (x) x x [...]
 68) [^dx(-x)]-ba i-na ša-al-ši ^dMu-ta-ab-ri-qa i-na re-e-bi-i
 69) [^dŠa-r]a-ab-da-a i-na ḥa-an-ši ^dRa-a-bi-i-ša i-na ši-iš-ši ^dTe-ri-id
 70) [^ri-na se-e-bi-i ^dI-dip-tu i-na sa-ma-ni-i ^dBé-e-en-na
 71) i-na ti-ši-i ^dŠi-i-da-na i-na eš-ri-i ^dMi-qi-it
 72) i-na il-te-en-še-e-ri-i ^dBé-e-el-ú-ri i-na ši-i-in-še-e-ri-i
 73) ^dUm-ma i-na ša-la-še-e-ri-i ^dLi-i-ba i-na er-bé-še-e-ri-i
 74) ba-a-bi il-ta-ka-an

“[...] He (Nergal stationed DN at the first, DN [at the second], [...] ba at the third, Muttabriqu (Continuous Flashes of Lightning) at the fourth, [Šar]abdû (Bailiff) at the fifth, Rābišu (Lurker) at

A similar list of Ereškigal's seven gatekeepers is found in KAR 142 iv 12–15: ^dNE-du₈ ^dKi-šár ^dEn-da-šurim-ma, ^dEN-URU-ul-la ^dEn-du₆-kù-ga, ^dEn-du₆-šuba ^dEn-nu-gi₄-gi₄, 7 ^di.DU₈.GAL.ME.EŠ šú ^dEreš-ki-gal.

⁷ Sumerian version, 119, 129–162; Akkadian version, CT 15, 45 f.: 42–62; r. 39–45 and parallels.

For a translation and complete list of sources for the Sumerian version, see W. R. Sladek, *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (1974) 100–102, 153–181; and D. Wolkstein/S. N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (1983) 52–89; and, for the Akkadian version, see Foster (as note 1) 403–409.

According to the legend of Etana, the heavens also had seven gates. They are all named after seven deities: Anu, Enlil, Ea, Sin, Šamaš, Adad and Ištar. See, C. Saportetti, *Etana* (1990) 94–95 exemplar E: 3–5.

the sixth, Ṭerid (Ousting) at the seventh, Idiptu (Wind) at the eighth, Bennu (Epilepsy) at the ninth, Šīdānu (Vertigo) at the tenth, Miqit (Collapse) at the eleventh, Bēl-ūri (Lord of the Roof) at the twelfth, Ummu (Burning Fever) at the thirteenth, (and) Lību (Scab) at the fourteenth *bābu*.”

The Akkadian term *bābu*, which according to the CAD and AHw., has the primary meaning “opening, doorway (Türeingang), door (Tür), gate (Tor), entrance”,⁸ has been purposely left untranslated for the time being since the author does not feel the primary meaning of the word fits this particular context. Since there are no less than three Sumero-Akkadian literary compositions that state that there were seven gates leading into the land of the dead, the mention of fourteen in the aforementioned passage almost certainly refers to the number of door leaves rather than the number of doorways. Based on this interpretation, each of the seven gates would have been composed of a lentil, two doorjambes, and two door leaves. Since this style of gateway was not uncommon in Mesopotamian art and architecture,⁹ it is therefore not unlikely that this type of gate was set up in each of the seven surrounding walls of the netherworld.¹⁰ The Akkadian term *bābu* in the context of lines 67–74 of the EA recension of Nergal and Ereškigal should therefore not be translated as its primary meaning “door, gate” but as a “door leaf (Türflügel)”, a hitherto unsuggested less frequently used secondary meaning of the word.

⁸ CAD B 14b; AHw. 95a.

⁹ For examples on cylinder seals, see D. Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (1987) 34 no. 102–103, 163 nos. 752–753, 166 nos. 765, and 173 no. 800; on a stone frieze, see J. Reade, *Mesopotamia* (1991) 12 fig. 10; on stone orthostats and bronze bands, see B. Hrouda, *Der alte Orient: Geschichte und Kultur des alten Vorderasiens* (1991) 132–133, 260, and 344–345; and, in monumental architecture, see W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur*, 2nd edition (1977) 214 fig. 192; R. D. Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs in the British Museum* (1970) pl. III; and A. Salonen, *Die Türen des alten Mesopotamien* (1961) pls. X–XII.

For textual references to double-doored gateways, see AHw. 688a sub *mutērtu*, and 1364a–b sub *tūpamtu*.

¹⁰ Th. Jacobsen, in *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (1976) 228, suggests that the Sumero-Babylonian underworld was envisioned as a city surrounded by seven walls.

For the suggestion that there is no basis for the claim that the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the netherworld was locked behind seven gates, see D. Katz, *Inanna’s Descent and Undressing the Dead as a Divine Law*, *ZA* 85 (1995) 224–228.

One may argue that if the number fourteen refers to the door leaves rather than the actual number of gates, then why did the scribe use *bābu* instead of *daltu* or *mutērtu*, two Akkadian terms which have the primary meaning “door leaf”,¹¹ and why did he not simply state that there were seven gates as the later exemplars do? Unfortunately, there is no clear cut evidence why *bābu* was used here instead of *daltu* or *mutērtu*, and why the number fourteen is used rather than seven. One possible explanation for the major discrepancies between the EA version and the Sultantepe and Uruk recensions, especially the mention of fourteen *bābū* rather than the standard seven, is that the Middle Babylonian copy may have been a highly abbreviated edition of an earlier version of the myth now lost, while the Neo-Assyrian and Seleucid exemplars may have been an expansion of a different earlier version which is also now lost.¹² Why *bābu* was used in the context of the aforementioned passage rather than *daltu* or *mutērtu* cannot be answered as easily. However, assuming that *bābu* is a synonym of *daltu* and/or *mutērtu*, and assuming that the original author of this literary work knew that *bābu* was a perfectly acceptable word for “door leaf”, then one may tentatively propose that when the myth was written down, its composer, for one reason or another, chose to render “door leaf” as *bābu* rather than *daltu* or *mutērtu*. Unfortunately, due to the complete lack of textual evidence both theories are purely speculation; however, the aforementioned proposals do provide valid, logical explanations for why there are so many differences between the earlier and later versions of the Nergal and Ereškigal myth and why “door leaf” is rendered by the term *bābu*. The only thing that can be said with certainty, is that the copy of the myth dictated to the el-Amarna scribe specifically mentioned fourteen *bābū*, not seven *bābū*, fourteen *dalātu*, or even fourteen *muterrētu*.¹³

¹¹ AHW. 154b, and 688a.

Unfortunately, the suggestion that *bābu* has a secondary meaning of “door leaf” cannot be substantiated by synonym lists. The term does not appear in the *daltu* synonym list and vice-versa. However, the possibility that *bābu* has a secondary meaning of “door leaf” is supported by the fact that *daltu* and *mutērtu*, both terms having the primary meaning “door leaf”, do not appear together in any synonym list. See CT 18, 3 rev. ii 1–20 and 4 rev. i 26–36; and, A. D. Kilmer, The First Tablet of “malku = šarru” in JAOS 83 (1963) 429, Malku I 250–251.

¹² M. Hutter, Altorientalische Vorstellungen von der Unterwelt: Literar- und religionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu «Nergal und Ereškigal» (OBO 63, 1985) 56–64; and, B. R. Foster, Before the Muses I (1993) 413.

¹³ For evidence that the text was dictated to the scribe, see M. E. Vogelzang, Some Aspects of Oral and Written Tradition in Akkadian, in: (ed.) M. E. Vogelzang/H. L. J. Vanstiphout, Mesopotamian Epic Literature: Oral or Aural? (1992) 265–278.

If the number fourteen refers to door leaves rather than the gates and if the term *bābu* does in fact have a less frequently used meaning of “door leaf” and is a synonym of *daltu* and/or *mutērtu*, then the earliest known edition of Nergal and Ereškigal upholds the Sumero-Babylonian tradition of seven gates leading into the heart of the netherworld. Thus, when the mighty plague god shouted out, “Let the doors be opened!”¹⁴, each member of the seven pairs of gatekeepers grasped his respective door latch and pulled the door leaf open from the center of the gate outward towards its doorjamb¹⁵. While the gates remained open, Nergal rushed into Ereškigal’s central court, yanked her down from her throne, and usurped the sole authority of the netherworld.

¹⁴ *ba-ba-a-tu lu pu-ut-ta-a*; EA 357: 75–76.

¹⁵ However, G. Wilhelm has suggested that *bābu* may not have had a secondary meaning of “door leaf” or have been a synonym of *daltu* or *mutērtu*. He pointed out privately a reference to a gate structure composed of an inner and outer doorway. This double gateway structure still favors the interpretation that there were only seven gates leading to the netherworld. Based on this style of architecture, Nergal would have stationed two demons at each of the seven gates; the first demon of the pair at the outer door of the gate structure and the second demon of the pair at the inner door. If this interpretation of EA 357: 67–74 is correct, then there is no reason to assume that *bābu* had a secondary meaning of “door leaf” or was a synonym of *daltu* or *mutērtu*.