

***Girtablullû* and Co: A New Function of the Scorpion-Man
in the Ancient Near East**

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Abstract

Although there are great differences concerning the appearance of the scorpion-man, many researchers don't really differentiate between them when it comes to meaning and function, and even seem to forget there is also a third type that always appears in basically the same, outspoken function.

- The most familiar and benevolent type is the so-called *Girtablullû*: the human-headed and human-bodied creature with scorpion tail. This creature will be referred to in this article as Type 3.
- The scorpion-bird- and scorpion-scorpion-man belong to Type 2: creatures with human-head and bird- or scorpion-body respectively.
- The oldest type (therefore referred to as Type 1) can resemble both the human-bodied (Type 3), and the scorpion/bird-bodied types (Type 2).

Thus, while both Type 3 and Type 2 can be identified by their iconography (human body or animal body, i.e. bird and scorpion respectively), Type 1 however, must be identified through its pose which is always "supportive", i.e., standing with its arms upraised to literally or virtually give support to either symbolic motifs (as the Sun-disc), or real-life objects (e.g. a throne). Type 1 is thus always shown in the same position.

The different poses and/or differences in appearance do have an impact on the meaning and function of the composite creature, and are therefore worth keeping in mind when trying to analyse the meaning of images in which the creatures appear.

Introduction and Types

One of the many fabulous creatures of the Ancient Near East is the scorpion-man, generally called the *Girtablullû*, and seen as a benevolent creature that has some connection with Shamash, the Sun-god. The name *Girtablullû* is a composition of *gir-tab*, which means "scorpion", and *lû-ùlu*, which means "untamed man"¹.

In accepting the benevolent character of the scorpion-man, most researchers seem to pass over the fact that there appear to be different kinds of scorpion-people, with more or less

¹ Wiggermann 1992: 180; Gubel 2000: 44.

human and animal elements. They do, though, make a distinction between two categories, but this is only iconographically, and not regarding their meaning. The first category (Type 3) is the *Girtablullû*, shown as a winged, bearded human-headed and human-bodied creature, but with hind-quarters and talons of a bird, a snake-headed penis and a scorpion's tail.



Scorpion-man, ca. 883-859 BC, Relief, Limestone, 218 x 83 cm, Iraq, Nimrud, Palace of Assurnasirpal II, Paris, Musée du Louvre, AO 19850²

The second category (Type 2) is what could be called the scorpion-bird-man or scorpion-scorpion-man, with a more bird-like or scorpion-like body standing on bird or lion feet³.



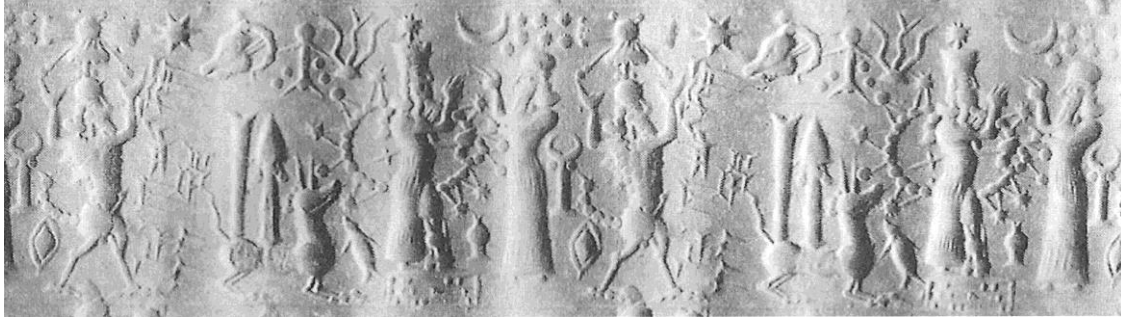
Pair of Scorpion-scorpion-men with Lion-legs, Neo-Elamite II (?), ca. 743-646 BCE, Jasper, 2.8 x 0.7 cm, London, British Museum, 1841, 0726.182.
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However, according to the difference in iconography and position they are depicted in, and the various contexts in which these creatures appear, it seems there is one more type qua meaning and function, although iconographically it does not differ from the two acknowledged types.

² Green 1985: pl. VIII.

³ Black and Green 1992: 161; Green 1993-1997: 250; Wiggermann 1993-1997: 239; Huxley 2000: 122.

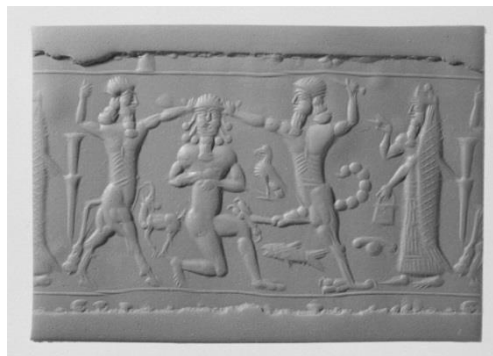
Type 1 can be like the *Girtablullû* (i.e. the more man-like hybrid) or resemble the scorpion-scorpion-man (i.e. with a scorpion-like body), but it must be considered a different type because of the posture it is shown in: with its hands stretched above its head in a supportive position.



Seal of Nisannaia, Assyrian, ca. 1000-750 BCE, Cylinder Seal, Chalcedony, 3.7 x 1.7 cm, Berlin, VA 508⁴

Context

Scorpion hybrids can be seen in a great variety of contexts. They appear in mythological, religious and ritual scenes in the company of animals (bird, gazelle, snake, etc.), other mythological creatures (e.g. sphinx, Bison-man, Fish-man, winged lion, winged bull, hero, etc.), god-symbols or the gods and goddesses themselves (e.g. moon-crescent, (winged) sun-disc, spade, eight-pointed star, and Sun-god, God-boat, Ishtar, Marduk.) They can be seen participating in fights (e.g. assisting Shamash in his fight against mountain-demons), they are sometimes attacked by an archer, or attacking themselves (e.g. a winged lion, a griffin, a nude male), or simply standing in a defensive position aiming their bow and arrow at a possible enemy.



Scorpion-Man and Bull-Man Attacking Nude Male, Babylonian, 8th-7th century BCE, Cylinder Seal, Chalcedony, 3.61 cm, Mesopotamia, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983.314.13

⁴ Collon 1987: Nr. 883.

Images of scorpion-men have been found in palaces, temples, houses and on vessels and other ceramics, on stamp and cylinder seals, thrones, furniture, murals, reliefs, musical instruments, boundary stones (*kudurrus*), and so on.

Meaning and Function

The scorpion-man is primarily known as the guardian of the mountains of sunset and sunrise, as mentioned in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*⁵. Hence his connection to the Sun-god Shamash, to whom he seems to be in a sort of assisting, accompanying function. But further research reveals that he is also depicted in this role with other deities, e.g. Ishtar.



Sennacherib Standing Before Procession of Gods, Neo-Assyrian, ca. 800-600 BCE, Relief, Iraq, Malta⁶

This supportive function of Type 1 can also be seen literally, namely where the hybrid is seen supporting the seat of a throne, the rim of a vessel, the moon-crescent, the winged Sun-disc, and so on.

When the scorpion-man (Type 3) is shown guarding palaces, entrances, gates, temples, the foundations of heaven, the Tree of Life, etc., we may assume it is there for its apotropaic, protective function. This function it could only take on because it was defeated by Marduk, together with the other ten creatures belonging to Tiamat's army, as told in the *Enuma Elish* (a Babylonian *Epic of Creation*)⁷.

This last role can be enhanced by the aspect of the creature; where the *Girtablullû* can be seen not only as a guarding, but also as a welcoming figure, the scorpion-bird or scorpion-

⁵ Amiet 1961: 133-134; Haas 1986: 73-74; Heimpel 1986: 140-141, 143; Black and Green 1992: 161; Green 1993-1997: 250; Moran 1995: 2328-2336; Wiggermann 1995: 180-181; Horowitz 1998: 96-98, 329; George 2000; Gubel 2000: 44, 52; Huxley 2000: 120, 124-125, 133; Debusscher 2004: 79-88; Hempelmann 2004: 46, 89.

⁶ Green 1993-1997: 263 fig. 2 + (detail drawing) Green 1985: pl. IXa.

⁷ Black and Green 1992: 161; Wiggermann 1992: 145; Wiggermann 1993-1997: 228-229; Lambert 2007: 37-59.

scorpion hybrid (Type 2) is much more frightening because of its outspoken reference to a dangerous animal and will certainly chase away all evil subjects or powers just by his looks. His apotropaic character is enlarged by its terrifying and fear-provoking appearance.

Conclusion

In short, we can differentiate three types of scorpion hybrids, not so much iconographically, but also by qua meaning and function:

- the **supportive** scorpion hybrid (Type 1),
- the **protective and welcoming** *Girtablullû* (Type 3)
- the **frightening** scorpion hybrid (Type 2).

Although they all may appear in similar contexts, their role and meaning differ slightly, according to their iconography, the context they are shown in, the position they are presented in, and, even more determining, the way they hold their hands or pincers.



Archaic Type of Scorpion-Man, ca. 2250-2000 BCE, Iran, Jiroft, Chlorite, 27 cm⁸

The supportive Type 1 seems to be the oldest (ca. 2500 BCE). It is the scorpion hybrid (man-like or scorpion-like) that is portrayed in a supportive position, i.e. with its hands or pincers stretched above its head. The protective *Girtablullû* (Type 3) only appears during the first millennium BCE, and was most popular between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE. This is the bearded human-headed and human-bodied creature, with hind-quarters and talons of a bird, a snake-headed penis and a scorpion's tail, that always holds his hands in a welcoming gesture called the *karābu*-pose, known from the house-gods who were often depicted in this pose near doors and entrances to welcome visitors.

⁸ Perrot and Madjidzadeh 2005: pl. IIIe.

The first frightening scorpion hybrid (i.e. the creature with a complete bird-like or scorpion-like body standing on bird or lion feet; Type 2) makes his entrance during the second half of the second millennium BCE but is also prevalent during the first half of the first millennium BCE.



Kudurru of King Nebuchadnezzar I (detail), ca. 1124-1103 BCE, Limestone, 65 x 21.5 x 17 cm (complete), London, British Museum, BM 90858
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In general we can state that all these types find their origin in the oldest images of scorpions; these images date from a period in which the animal had a cosmic function: it handled the heavenly objects in the sky with its pincers and it overlooked the correct rising and setting of the sun, necessary to maintain the cosmic order⁹. The oldest scorpion hybrids were shown with their hands or pincers up in the sky because they still had this cosmic function, but later images prove that this role was not lost in later times. Nevertheless, in later periods, the scorpion hybrid took on more functions and meanings, hence the variations in his iconography. The hybrid first started to support other objects as well and it now assisted or supported other gods (Type 1). A fine example of this is Ishtar, who as a fertility-goddess was also known as Ishara and in this capacity was represented by a scorpion¹⁰.

The apotropaic function of the scorpion-man (Type 3) in its turn also derives from the early practice of scorpions in magical, protective rituals; the animal would be burned so that the ashes could be used to make apotropaic drawings¹¹. We may assume that each type of scorpion hybrid played an apotropaic role in one way or another; this function was without a doubt the most vital whenever he was depicted guarding something, but was less prominent in other contexts, although it was never completely absent.

⁹ Amiet 1961: 133-134; Wiggermann 1992: 147-149; Wiggermann 1993-1997: 230.

¹⁰ Toscanne 1977: 193, 195; Seidl 1989: 157; Van Dijk 1998: 9-10; Stol 2000: 117-118, 269; Galter 2007: 656-659; Pientka-Hintz 2009: 579.

¹¹ Pientka-Hintz 2009: 578.

The iconography of the frightening scorpion hybrid (Type 2) was meant to not only protect, but also to scare away evil and even to actively defend, so that the apotropaic character of the creature was enhanced by its looks.

In general it may be said that the scorpion hybrids played three distinctive roles: they could support (Type 1), actively defend (Type 2), or passively defend (Type 3). Although the differences are perhaps minimal, they are worth taking into consideration whenever one tries to understand an image in which a scorpion hybrid is depicted.

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