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A demon in the bathroom

Bathroom demons, an unusual theme for modern man, but in ancient Mesopotamia a daily hazard. Although certain aspects of ancient Mesopotamia, like the law code laid down by Hammurabi, have become ingrained in modern civilisation, others such as the colourful demonology have almost completely vanished in the limbos of time. Only certain members of the demonic family have in a way managed to survive. For instance, Incubus and its female counterpart Succubus have survived into modern psychiatry as the Incubus syndrome, in which there is the delusion of being sexually approached at night by an unseen lover.¹

Other demons manifested themselves as diseases, the symptoms of which have in some cases been recorded in astonishing detail. Epilepsy, or disorders involving the patient turning “his neck to the left [. . .], while his hands and feet are stretched, his eyes are wide open, [. . .] saliva flows in/from his mouth, he makes . . . sounds; he does not know himself; [. . .] it overwhelms him time and again”,² could be caused by many different demons or deities, such as Antašubba, Bennu, or Lugal Urra. Another was Šulak, one of many names of the “Lurker” (Rābišu), a demon which “lies in wait for its victims in lonely places”.² In contrast to the other epilepsy or epilepsy-like inflicting demons, Šulak was an entity with a highly restricted territory, namely, the bathroom.

Demons lurking in bathrooms were also notorious among Jews, Arabs, and Europeans until the Middle Ages.² In modern times, drowning in the bathtub of patients suffering from an epileptic insult is well known and described as a serious threat.³ Aside from epilepsy, cerebral haemorrhages (“if the right side of his body is in its entirety let down: stroke (inflicted by) a Lurker . . .”²) may also frequently occur in the lavatory or bathroom, as recently pointed out in a Japanese study.⁴

Although ancient and modern aetiology may differ, it is interesting to see that the possible dangers surrounding a patient prone to epilepsy or strokes, while taking a bath, were already noticed over 2000 years ago.

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