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# Goats in the Ancient Near East and Their Relationship with the Mythology, Fairytale and Folklore of These Cultures

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## Abstract

This study investigates the role of goats in the myths and folklore of various Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures. Images in artefacts, and metaphors or direct reference to goats in texts (the primary sources in this study) from the geographic area of Mesopotamia, Sumer, Akkad, Anatolia and Ancient Iran (Elam) were studied. Secondary sources provided the context within which the sources occurred. Where images and references to goats occurred, their meaning and relationship to belief systems or their underlying ‘motifs’ within the ANE cultures are identified, categorised and discussed. This study shows that aside from the important utilitarian function of goats in the ANE, their use in rituals and symbolism has provided us with several motifs related to goats that are still in use today. These include the motifs of fertility, intelligence and craftiness.

**Keywords:** goat, Ancient Near East, mythology, cultures

## 1. Introduction

Man is essentially a myth-maker—using myths, folklore, fable and legend to contextualise the society in which he lives. Since goats have been a companion of man in the midst of his society since the dawn of civilisation, it is only logical that goats feature in oral tradition. Oral tradition that, over millennia, has been captured in the written myths, legends, epics, fable and fairy tales that we know today.

Many cultures have used goats in stories that portray various social constructs of their times. But here, it may be important to first digress and provide some analysis of the different types of folklore. Folktales, specifically, can be compared across cultures through recurring ideas or ‘motifs’ (dominant themes), which are defined by the political, economic and religious discourse of the time. Motifs may be situations, actions, events, characters or objects. Very often, the motifs are abstractions or models, the details being secondary and differing according to the variant: thus the typical situation (motif) of the hero outwitting the stupid giant or giants is the same whether the hero is a god, a prince, a young huntsman, a retired soldier or the Three Billy Goats Gruff. The purse of gold may be a jug of oil that never empties, the bird that lays the golden eggs, a plant that provides eternal life or the little goat that bleats causing a table laden with food to appear to the melancholic (but always

attractive), ill-treated, stepsister [1]. It can be said that once we have identified the motif behind a folktale, we can then determine whether the goat has been used as a cursory object to creatively illustrate the story or whether the goat is the actual subject of the story.

Very often, in folktales, goats are used for creative illustration (sometimes the goat could just as well have been a pig, cow or chicken). But, other times, goats convey a specific meaning to the story and play a role in the motif that cannot be as accurately illustrated by another animal [2].

Folklore includes popular traditions, legendary ballads, local proverbial sayings, superstitions, old customs, folktales, legends, games, sports and nursery rhymes. Edward Clodd believed that the chief function of folklore was to explore the savage beliefs and practices underlying established religion. However, folktales also provide insight into human psychology through their underlying meaning [3].

Myth is generally distinguished from legends and fairy tales in that the former addresses cosmic themes such as the creation of the world, the beginning of life and the origins of civilisation. They may have arisen as embellished accounts of historical events, as a means to justify religious ritual or as metaphor or representation of natural phenomena [4]. Mythic stories are enacted on a supernatural scale: heroes of myth are gods and superhumans. Heroes of fairy tales and legends are ordinary men and women [2] although magic and fantastic animals, creatures or events may be involved.

Fables are a somewhat different genre. It is generally thought that fables were the creation of the slave Aesop who lived on the island of Samos in the sixth century BC. He won the favour of Croesus, king of Lydia, (and his freedom) by telling stories [5]. Aesop's fables have an industrious, efficient style, always ending with a moral. They are mainly for adult enjoyment and generally depict animals' instinctive behaviour in humanistic terms: the ant is industrious, the fox is crafty, and the tortoise is slow. Fable 'morals' or 'motifs' are centred on the notion that 'life is a constant struggle' and of 'survival of the fittest' [2].

Whereas fables are indifferent and realistic, the animals of European fairy tale are more compassionate and magical. Fairy tales are generally more optimistic and joyful than fables (although this is disputed by some and proven by some stories with unhappy endings [6]), are characterised by a lack of realism, are not believed by those who tell them and generally aim to teach [2]. Fables tend to depict animals as merciless and irresponsible, while fairy tales make them intelligent and benevolent. Fables tend to depict animals in terms of behaviourism, while the fairy tale reminds one of the analytical psychologies of Freud or Jung [2]. A distinction has been made that fairy tale and myth bring animals closer to men, while fables and satire, while seemingly doing the same thing, do the reverse; they are conflict-ridden and put animals in their place—as submissive to humans [2].

However, as we may all have experienced, the interaction with a live animal is a very fundamental and personal encounter, which largely negates the limitations often imposed by cultural perception. Thus, the goat, being an animal of unique intelligence, virility and behaviour, so close to man because of its usefulness and hardiness, has characteristics that have been described in the same way among different cultures. The goat is depicted as a symbol of fertility, abundance, aggression and good luck in many of these civilisations.

These cross-cultural similarities and differences are of interest but, also, the changes in how these animals are depicted over time warrant scrutiny. It is surely modifications in human and social conditions that create or cause these fluctuations in how goats are depicted because the character of goats is a genetic rather than an environmental manifestation.

This chapter investigates the role played by goats in the myths and folklore of various Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures. To this effect, images in artefacts,

and metaphors or direct reference to goats in texts (to be considered the primary sources in this study) from the area are studied. Secondary sources provided the context within which the sources occur. Where images and references to goats occur, their meaning and relationship to belief systems or their underlying 'motifs' within the ANE cultures are identified and discussed. Ultimately, this chapter aims to determine whether ANE cultures ascribed certain characteristics to goats that may still be applicable today.

## 2. Materials and methods

Although the array of domesticated animals is vast, this analysis investigates primarily goats (and similar species such as the ibex where relevant or where ambiguity occurs) in the myth, folklore and fairy tale (if these can be defined) of the Near Eastern cultures of Mesopotamia, Sumer, Akkad, Anatolia and Ancient Iran (Elam). The timespan that is covered by this chapter is approximately 3000 years. It is acknowledged that this is too vast an expanse to make specific inferences about the impact of the goat on the political, social or religious contexts within which goat symbolism may occur, nor can one surmise at the influence that this political, social or religious context makes on the way the goat is considered in society.

## 3. The domestication and use of goats (and other species)

It is believed that wild animals were herded into enclosures for killing to improve on the success of hunting—images depicting this practice have been found [7]. After a time, animals that exhibited certain characteristics that would make them predisposed to domestication became accustomed to this close contact. This close association between man and animal led to the domestication [8] of some species (but not others). These 'phases of domestication' can be categorised into 'wild', 'managed' and 'domesticated' [9] states.

Jared Diamond [10] has suggested several characteristics that would predispose certain species to domestication, and these include:

- High fertility and reproductive rate and a fast growth rate
- Animals that can be herded and handled without becoming aggressive
- Animals that are adaptable to a range of environments and feedstuffs that are not directly in competition with man's diet
- Animals with a docile nature that are not prone to flightiness or skittishness
- Animals that naturally move in herds, and submit to a pack leader

In all these characteristics, the goat excels.

According to Gilbert [11], wild sheep (*Ovis*) and goats (*Capra*) were the earliest livestock domesticated during the Palaeolithic to Neolithic transition (9000–7000 B.C.E.) in northern and eastern Mesopotamia. Pigs (*Sus*) and cattle (*Bos*) were predominantly domesticated in southern Mesopotamia. Later introductions included horses (*Equus* 2500 B.C.E.), donkeys (*Equus* 4000–3000 B.C.E.) and chickens (*Gallus gallus* 1500 B.C.E.).

Recent research [12] has placed the process of the domestication of goats in the region of south-western Asia, from the eastern Mediterranean to Turkey and from the southern Levant through south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria to the high Zagros mountain pastures and arid lowland plains of Iraq and Iran. The process of domestication spanned approximately 500 years—culminating around 8000 B.C.E. Zeder and Hesse [12] identified a distinct profile of young male goat slaughter and prolonged female survivorship (or delayed slaughter of females) in herds in the upland areas of northern Iraq and north-western Iran through the analysis of goat remains. Animal production involves the practice of keeping females for breeding and slaughtering males at a younger age for meat. This is in contrast to the remains of hunted populations, which clearly show a focus on fully adult males with females and young taken only occasionally.

The ancestors of the modern goat were potentially two species, *Capra falconeri*, and the Bezoar goat, *Capra aegagrus* [13], being the most cited candidate (*Capra hircus aegagrus* is still found in its wild form in the Zagros mountains of Iran and Iraq).

Most of the domesticated animals we know today originated in the Ancient Near East. These include cattle, goats, pigs, sheep, cats, dogs, ducks, chickens, geese, horses, donkeys and mules [8]. Their use for milk, meat, fat, leather, wool, hair, draught, transportation, manure [8], cheese [9], the storage of wealth [11], eggs [9], recreational (and possibly educational) zoos [9], drugs [9] and for religious use (sacrifice, extispicy and for maintenance of the religious complex) is documented.

Sheep and goats were kept in large flocks that belonged to the state, the temple or private owners and each was branded with its owner's mark (or that of the god for which it was intended). Clearly articulated contracts between owners and shepherds have been found. Shepherds often kept all the dairy products and some of the wool as compensation for their work. Their compensation could also include a share of the growth in the flock. **Figure 1** shows terracotta tablets inscribed with the records of goatherds and cowherds [14].

Wool (from sheep) and hair (from goats) were initially plucked (pulled or combed), but shearing was practised from the middle of the second millennium. Milk was obtained from cows, sheep and goats (camels and water buffalo were also used for this purpose). Yoghurt, cheese, butter and ghee were produced. Butter was made by churning the milk in a narrow-necked jar [7] and rolled with the foot or rocked [9]. Since fresh milk spoiled rapidly, it was often only used in medicines, which would be made fresh and used immediately. **Figure 2** shows a cylinder seal from Mari with a typical agricultural scene. Many such seals have been found, which may indicate the economic activity in which the owner of the seal may have distinguished him (or her)self.



**Figure 1.** Terracotta tablets inscribed with the records of goatherds (left) and cowherds (right), unearthed at Lagash, Mesopotamia, and dated to 2250–2175 B.C.E. (housed in the collection at the Louvre, Paris: [17]).



**Figure 2.**  
*Cylinder seal from Mari (3000–2000 B.C.E.). Top register showing milking scene, bottom register with goats, hero figures and eagle with lion-head.*



**Figure 3.**  
*Stone panel from the central palace of Tiglath-Pileser III. Neo-Assyrian, 730–727 B.C.E. Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Iraq (housed in the British Museum).*



**Figure 4.**  
*Goat skins used as flotation devices. Stone panel from the central palace of Tiglath-Pileser III. Neo-Assyrian, 730–727 B.C.E. Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Iraq (housed in the British Museum).*

Although horses were important in battle, goats were often taken as booty (**Figure 3**) and inflated goat skin bags were used in warfare as flotation devices (**Figure 4**).

#### 4. Goats in the texts, art and imagery of the ANE

Primary sources available to the modern scholar of the ANE cultures include objects, architecture and written texts that have survived environmental extremes. This investigation seeks to determine whether, if goats appear in these material

artefacts, there is some indication that they were considered more than merely useful as a livestock species with utilitarian value but also as an object in myth, legend or fairy tale.

#### 4.1 Goats in ANE literature

Several texts excavated from ancient Mesopotamia refer to animals in general [15]. These can be categorised into the following types:

- Wordlists
- Omen collections (*omina*) (including guidelines involving extispicy and apotropaic rituals)
- Myths
- Short, functional fables, with no expressed moral
- Personified animals in longer narrative fables, debates or contests
- Mentioned in propagandistic literature as being subjugated, hunted, collected, etc. by the king.
- The consumption of animals (as well as recipes)
- In humorous and ironic anecdotes.

For several of these categories, examples were found in a collection of Sumerian inscriptions [16, 17]. If evident, this categorisation is shown and possible explanations for the texts are provided in parentheses.

- Page 99. 3.111—‘Although it has never gone there, the goat knows the wasteland’ (Category: ironic anecdote. Possible explanation: a goat has instinct to survive in the desert, or a goat is intelligent—this perhaps relates to the idea of someone having a ‘gut feeling’ about something)
- Page 101. 3.123—‘May you hold a kid in your right arm and may you hold a bribe in your left arm’ (Category: ironic anecdote. Possible explanation: the kid can be brought as an offering—to request a favour from the god—but if the offering does not work, you also can back it up with a bribe to the priest who can implore the god on your behalf. This is interesting, since it suggests that people were quite aware that priests could ‘bend the rules’ if requested/motivated to do so).
- Page 106. 3.153—‘The goat spoke in the manner of a (wise) old woman, but acted in the manner of an unclean woman’ (Category: ironic anecdote. Possible explanation: goats are considered intelligent, but they are bawdy and eat everything including unclean things, which make them unclean. Here, the sexual nature of the goat is identified).
- Page 128. 5.55—‘A lion had caught a helpless she-goat’ (and she said), ‘Let me go and I will give you my fellow ewe in return.’ ‘If I let you go, tell me first your name!’ The she-goat answered the lion, ‘You don’t know my name? “I am

cleverer than you” is my name.’ After the lion had come to the sheepfold he roared, ‘I released you!’ She answered from the other side, ‘You released me, you are clever,... the sheep are not here!’ (Category: narrative contest. Possible explanation: again showing the intelligence of the goat. Alster [16, 17] suggests that this is the Sumerian fable that resembles closest to a true ‘Aesopian’ one. The Sumerian fables provide a definite answer to the much discussed question, whether or not the fable as a genre was invented by the Greeks. Although the genre is now proven to be considerably older than the Greeks, it does not necessarily mean, however, that it was first invented in Mesopotamia).

- Page 167. 8.Sec.B4.—‘Wearing a long beard like a goat’ (Category: humorous anecdote. Possible explanation: merely a physical description of a ‘goatee’ beard)
- Page 167. 8.Sec.B5.—‘A goat is the gift of a large kid’ (Category: ironic anecdote. Possible explanation: goats can reproduce at a very young age—as young as 4 months).
- Page 167. 8.Sec.B6.—“A goat speaks as follows to another goat: I also toss my head.” (Category: ironic anecdote. Possible explanation: animals of the same species are likely to behave in the same way. Or, people of a certain character can identify with another person of the same character, that is, it takes one to know one).
- Page 169. 8.Sec.B8.—‘When the wolves were pursuing a goat, it turned around, and its feet stumbled over its own feet’ (Category: humorous anecdote. Possible explanation: a goat is ‘tripsy-footed’?)
- Page 171. 8.Sec.B28.—‘A fox spoke to a goat, “Let me put my shoes in your house!” The goat answered, “When the dog comes, let me hang them on a nail!” The fox answered, “If the dog stays like that in your house, bring me my shoes. Let me not stay till midnight!”’ (Category: narrative contest. Possible explanation: this dialogue again suggests the intelligence of the goat in being able to outwit another creature).

## 4.2 Goats in ANE artefacts and imagery

Goats are evident in the mythology of ANE as shown in various imagery. Two types of artefacts are available to the art historian [18]: objects in the round and two-dimensional objects. Objects carved in the round include figurines, theriomorphic vessels and weights. Figurines and animal-shaped vessels were often rendered in baked clay and rhyta (singular rhyton) in metal. Many of these objects were used in the temple complexes as votive objects (being brought as tribute to a god), as apotropaic figures (buried underneath the floors of buildings to ward off evil), were used during religious ceremonies or were used to weigh the produce brought to the temple by the citizens who formed part of the distributive temple economies. Two-dimensional objects included low-relief stelae, perforated panels in stone or ceramic, tablets and hollow carved stamps or cylinder seals. These objects had decorative use in temple architecture (stelae and panels). Tablets were used as administrative tools (to record numbers of livestock or produce), to train scribes, to capture true literature and royal inscriptions or to write letters. Stamps and cylinder seals were personal signatures used to identify objects or show ownership [19].

A general search for images of goats on ANE artefacts was undertaken. This was done through a search of archaeological research papers and books, which

either provided references to relevant artefacts or showed photographs or tracings of artefacts. Where these items were considered important but the images were unclear, higher quality images were sought. Museum collections that have been made available for public viewing via the Internet were also examined.

This was followed by a classification and comparison of the images of the various artefacts.

To provide structure to the comparison, images that depict a similar theme or ‘motif’ were grouped. To this effect, a method was sought to provide some meaning to a classification. Whereas some scholars have argued that the depiction of animals in Mesopotamian art illustrates the start of religion, others have argued that animals provide merely a symbolic representation of the world as the artist saw it. However, it must be agreed that there must be multiple levels of meaning. To this end, the system provided by Root [20] to classify the use of animals in art is used here. An approximate seriation within each group was also undertaken (although it is conceded that the chronology provided by scholars commenting on these pieces is assumed correct, which may not necessarily be the case). The groupings made are discussed below.

4.2.1 Group A: goats as vehicles for experimentation with abstraction and decorative compositional dynamic

The goat lends itself to abstraction and decoration with its curved horns and upturned tail—this is especially the case in the use of the goat (or ibex) in the art of Ancient Anatolia. The depiction of goats in Mesopotamian art is often stereotypical, allowing one to assume that sketchbooks were used and artists trained in standard doctrines. In the artefacts of this group, the artists have attempted to depict goats in their most recognisable form (**Figures 5 and 6**). These include full profile; walking, or standing with their horned heads shown from the side; or lying down. Mostly, single animals are shown. Where goats are not shown entirely, they are suggested by parts of their body, such as horns in the goat-head rhyton (**Figure 7**).



**Figure 5.**  
*Elamite mountain goat from Susa, 3100–2900 B.C.E. (housed in the Louvre, Paris).*



**Figure 6.**  
*A baked clay pot, sporting a goat, from Umma which is dated to the Amorite dynasty of the nineteenth–eighteenth century B.C.E. (housed at the Louvre, Paris: [17]).*



**Figure 7.**  
*(a) Burnished pottery rhyton in the form of a goat's head from Iran (Elam) that is dated to 1000 B.C.E. (b and c) Earthenware goat rhyton dated to between 1000 and 2000 B.C.E. (All housed at the Sankokan University, Japan).*

Although the objects and images shown here have been placed in the category of ‘abstraction and decorative composition’ because they are particularly striking, some inferences regarding their symbolism can be made. Firstly, these objects may have

served as votive objects, as apotropaic figurines or as libation vessels (as part of a ritual in which characteristics of the animal depicted are expected to be imbibed by the drinker). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in both objects of **Figures 5 and 6**, the goat is shown with its right leg foremost. As Green [21] suggests in a paper dealing with apotropaic figurines (that lead with the left foot), this may be the beginnings of the custom of entering a holy place with the right foot first.

#### 4.2.2 Group B: goats as players in specific rituals of human society

Generally, ancient Mesopotamian gods were human in form. But both demonic and virtuous creatures were often depicted as animal-human hybrids. Specific animals were associated with certain gods and often became their symbols [9]. Thus, the dog was associated with Gula, the god of healing; the lion-snake-eagle with Marduk and the goat-fish with Ea (or Enki) [9]. Hatziminaglou and Boyazoglu [22], however, state that goats were sacred to Marduk and is often pictured accompanied by a goat (unfortunately, they do not reference this statement and are perhaps confusing images of Ea with Marduk).

Goats were an important element of divining the future [9, 23]: firstly, through unsolicited omens or observations (as from the omen list 'If a City is Situated on an Elevation' where both domesticated and wild animals were used) and secondly, through solicited omens through extispicy (reading of entrails) or merely a ritual involving an animal that did not necessarily involve its slaughter.

Where a god had an associated animal, as is the case, for example, with Ea or Enki, worshippers could bring tribute to a god either by the live goat itself or in the form of their animal statue (these votive objects could be clay, gold, bronze and/or silver), or in the form of a figure bringing the goat tribute. Images and figurines depicting this practice (shown in **Figure 8**) are referred to by modern scholars as 'goat bearers' (British Museum). It is interesting to note the abundance of the 'goat bearer' imagery over several cultures (Sumerian, Anatolian, Assyrian and Elamite) and over a long expanse of time. Further examples can be found in the work of Marchesi and Marchetti [24], which shows more than five examples from several Early Dynastic Mesopotamian sites.

Comparison of these images reveals that all the goat bearers have goatees or beards and all but one (from Zincirli carrying the goat on his neck) bear the goats in his arms. This may be important since, as Breniquet [18] mentions, very often the animal used to represent the god in visual material or in association with him shares the facial features or appearance (physiognomy) and behaviour of the god. The placement of the animal with the god renders the reading unequivocal and is part of the essence of the god.

According to Heinsohn [25], tribute was not so much to the god but to the priests themselves who managed the temple complex, as thanks for the role played by the priest in the act of sacrifice (it could be dangerous), as well as for absorbing the guilt for the killing itself (an act created to calm an emotionally traumatised community—initially following a cataclysmic event). It seems that ritual sacrifice was abandoned when further cataclysmic events no longer occurred and thus sacrifice (used to placate an anxious community) was no longer necessary. At this point, votive objects may have replaced tributes of live animals.

Although modern scholars refer to these images as 'goat bearers' (British Museum; [16]), it is not clear from, nor mentioned in, the literature whether these statues represent worshippers, priests or the god Ea (Enki) himself. Where the goat bearers form part of a scene where other tribute is being brought, it seems clear that the goat bearer is indeed a worshipper or tribute-payer; however, where the images are solitary, the identity of the bearer is ambiguous.



**Figure 8.**  
(a) Plaque from Nippur, temple of In'anak (early dynastic I (3000–2330 B.C.E.)) [27]. (b) A worshipper carrying kids from Susa, middle Elamite, thirteenth century B.C.E. (housed in the Louvre, Paris: [17]) (c) from the citadel gate of Zincirli 900–800 B.C.E. ([26]: Plate XV) (d) apotropaic protective spirit guarding entrance to private chambers, from Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Iraq, neo-Assyrian, 883–859 BC. His curled moustache, long hair and beard are typical of figures of this date. Carrying goat and ear of corn (housed in the British Museum).

Whole herds of animals were kept for their gods by their temples and branded with their marks [9, 23]. One can assume that when live animals were replaced by votive objects as tributes, then, these same herds would not have been used as sacrificial animals, but as a means to support the attendants of the temple complex and to redistribute to the community.

Animals were also used as the recipients of evil transferred from a human host, what we know today as the 'scapegoat' ritual [23]. This 'transferral' of the evil (whether bad luck or an illness) could be achieved through the patient handling the animal, by the performance of a ritual and then letting the animal go (into a wasteland or a river), by the performance of a ritual and then slaughtering the animal and burying it (or discarding its remains in a river or wasteland, or by splitting the animal in half and passing between the two halves) or by the patient spitting on

it, or eating it, or being covered with it (its blood), or by merely having the animal in proximity to the affected person. The scapegoat ritual was often used by the military and sometimes by cities to remove the scourge of a plague [27].

Animal figurines could be used for scapegoat rituals or as apotropaic figurines that were buried under the floors of domestic dwellings, barracks or temples to ward off evil [21]. Elaborate rituals describing an array of figurines to use (including the goat-fish), and the numbers of figurines that are required, have been documented [21].

#### 4.2.3 Group C: goats as signifiers of specific political/social ideas of human society

The name 'Enki' literally means Lord, en, of the earth or the netherworld, ki, the patron deity of the apkallus (fish-men), who lived in the underground sweetwaters, the Abzu (Sumerian) or Apsu (Akkadian) [28]. In this imagery, the god Enki/Ea was associated with the 'Sacred tree' (often erroneously called the 'Tree of life').

The Anzu/Apsu was considered, a not altogether unpleasant intermediary place, between the earth and the netherworld (almost literally the place of spring water from which life springs). This idea may be suggested by the imagery of the goat in the tree (as shown in **Figure 9**). This was possibly a libation device, and used as temple furniture.

What is important to note here is that although the goat in the tree represents a certain idea known to the community (Enki and the Sacred tree), and goat imagery is used in furniture or libation devices, the animals themselves were not worshipped [18].

#### 4.2.4 Group D: goats as figures in cosmic contests and 'performances'

Two examples of the use of goats in this manner were found.



**Figure 9.** The lapis-lazulli goat buck in the tree from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, belonging to the Uruk period c 2600–2500 B.C.E. was probably temple furniture—possibly a stand (housed in the British Museum).

4.2.4.1 Ishtar or the mistress of the beasts?

In Anatolian art and folklore, a ‘mistress of the beasts’ occurs, often associated with the hunt. This mistress (and sometimes master) is associated with a feline (usually a lion) and a wild goat, ibex or gazelle [29]. This goddess may have been Cybele (or Dali in Armenia) and may also be related to the goddess associated with the hunt of the Caucasus (Georgians who are believed to be descendants of the Hittites) who is always associated with goats, ibex or turs (*Capra cylindricornis* or *Capra* [ibex] *caucasica*) [30]. However, representations showing similar iconography (a female figure associated with goats and lions or hunting or warfare) are attributed by some scholars as Ishtar: the goddess of warfare and sexuality. Some of these artefacts are shown in **Figures 10** and **11**.

4.2.4.2 Enki/Ea

The myths that incorporate Ea (or Enki) are of particular significance here since the primary sources reveal him to be associated with the goat. The spouse of Ea was Damkina and his cult centre was Eridu. Marduk was Ea’s son. During the Kassite



**Figure 10.**  
*Goddess seated on a goat over two lions from Kultepe, Anatolia, from the Middle Bronze Age, 2000–1595 B.C.E. [37].*



**Figure 11.**  
*Queen of animals feeds her wild goats, thirteenth B.C.E., from tomb III, Minet el-Beida, harbour of Ugarit, Syria. Lid of pyxis (round box with lid) (housed in the Louvre).*

period, Marduk was elevated to the top of the Babylonian pantheon and his cult centre was Babylon [19].

Ea plays a role in several of the Mesopotamian myths. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, where aside from being mentioned as one of the gods that have made Gilgamesh wise, he is the god that breaks rank and warns the human Ut-napishtim (whom Gilgamesh seeks to reveal the secret of eternal life since Ut-napishtim survived the flood and has been made immortal) of the impending flood sent by the gods to destroy man. This role of Enki is again shown in the myth of Atrahasis, the Flood story. Here too, Enki warns man about the flood and gives him instruction to build a boat.

Enki plays a larger role in the Epic of Creation. Here, it is explained, in the beginning, there were only two gods, Apsu (who represents the primordial waters under the earth) and Tiamat (the personification of the sea). They beget four generations of gods, who become noisy and unbearable. Apsu decides to put an end to their troublesome ways, but the plot is discovered by Ea 'who knows everything'. He puts Apsu and his evil vizier, Mummu, to sleep and then slays them. He then assumes the belt, crown and mantle of radiance, takes over the dwelling place of Apsu as his own, and there, with his spouse Damkina, creates Marduk. Marduk then proceeds to win all sorts of fantastic battles with the encouragement of his father, Ea, and is finally made the king of the gods. One of Marduk's actions is to create man (to do the work of the gods so that the gods can be at leisure).

In shorter myths, again Ea plays a role. Mostly as the 'one who knows everything'. These include the myth of Adapa (a priest of Ea in his cult temple at Eridu); the Epic of Anzu; the Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld and the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal.

The relief and apotropaic figures below (**Figure 12**) depict the god Enki (Sumerian) or Ea (Akkadian). Enki was the god of productivity [31] and freshwater streams, springs and lakes, as well as the abzu (or apsu – the subterranean freshwater ocean on which the earth supposedly floated; [8, 31]) and, in this guise, was symbolized as the (or a) fish [9].

Enki was also associated with wisdom, science, craftsmanship and magic and this part of his nature was symbolised by a goat [9]. Several stone reliefs and cylinder seal impressions were found showing goat bearers, a goat in the scene, or a goat shown below the god with water or fishes also represented.



**Figure 12.**  
(a) Enki represented as a fish-man in stone relief and (b) as an apotropaic figure (source unknown).

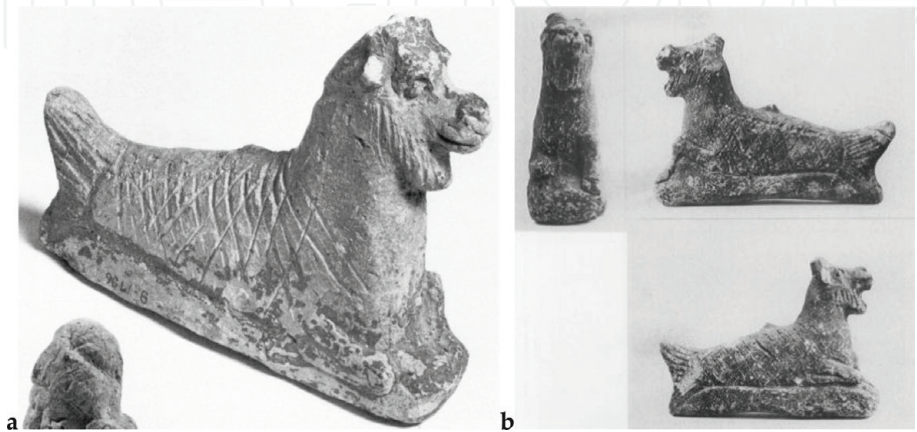
This ‘dual’ nature of the god ultimately resulted in the use of the symbol of the goat-fish (literally ‘Carp-goat’) for the god Enki or Ea [32] (Akkadian *suhurmašû*; Neo-Sumerian *Selekuid*). Figures of this deity are named in certain apotropaic (averting evil) rituals [21]. Although no Assyrian monumental art of this deity has been found, the requirements for their manufacture (dimensions, gold leaf required etc.) are alluded to in Nimrud texts for a temple of Nabu at Kalhu [32]. Artefacts representing this deity are shown in **Figures 13–15**.

The boundary stones each show celestial objects (stars and crescent moons), monuments or temples and deities. On all three boundary stones, the goat-fish (curved or twisted horns and hooves) can be clearly distinguished from the dragon (which is generally depicted with straight horns, talons or claws and a snake-like body).

Similarities between the renditions of goat-fish include one front leg bent back and the other forward (slightly bent and lifted) (although both left leg and right leg forward can be seen), cross-hatchings used to indicate the scales of a fish, twisted splayed horns (except the foundation figurine, which may have had horns that are now broken off). All the boundary stones’ goat-fish are without beards (goatees).



**Figure 13.**  
(a–c) Mesopotamian boundary stones of the Kassite era, 1600–1150 B.C.E. [38]. In (a) the goat-fish can be seen on the bottom right, in (b) in the top register, and in (c) in the top register.



**Figure 14.**  
(a) A goat-fish from Assur (housed in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley: [24]: Plate XV). (b) Foundation figurine of a *suhurmašû*, from Assur (Of beige sun-dried clay and had an original coating of black wash). On the left side of the figurine is a one-line inscription that reads ‘Come in, favourable hearing and compliance!’ ([32]: Plate V).



**Figure 15.**

*A cylinder seal, from the late Babylonian era, possibly depicts a worshipper before divine images, including the suḫurmašû ([32]: Plate X) (housed in the Brooklyn Museum).*

## 5. Discussion

From the preceding source material, several inferences relating to the perception of ANE societies regarding goats can be made. The images shown by the material artefacts, in which goats are portrayed, possess a decorative, symbolic, religious or mythological motive. It is clearly discernible when goats are merely portrayed as a livestock species. These include the goatherd tablets, the agricultural scene in the cylinder seal from Mari, and the battle scene where goats and sheep probably represent booty. It is clear from the (quantitatively) numerous depictions of goats in domestic scenes that goats played an important role in the household and temple economies of the time. In these scenes, it is clear that the goat represents itself and no underlying ‘motif’ or meaning is intended.

Also, generally, goats are rendered very realistically (long, straight or curved horns and upright tail) and in their characteristic attitudes since they were a familiar sight in everyday life. This can be expected, since, in general, variations are most often found in animals that the artists were not as familiar with (such as elephants or giraffes) [33].

The animal-animal hybrid, the goat-fish, representing Ea or Enki, is most probably the basis of the constellation Capricorn. According to Roy [34], all evidence points to the Sumero-Akkadian astronomer priests as the makers of the constellations as we know them. Mesopotamia is found on the required latitude to have seen all the constellations (some are not visible from the southern hemisphere), the position of the stars at that time (3000–2000 B.C.E.) would provide a perfect fit for their observations, and the constellations themselves match almost every deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon, including the goat-fish of Ea, now known as Capricorn (so-named by the Greeks [35]).

In the myth of the creation of the world, Marduk, aside from creating man, also defined the calendar, setting up the Zodiac and the sequence of celestial events that would signify the changing seasons [34]. Star lists in cuneiform have been found, detailing these constellations and their positions relative to each other. The positions of the stars were used for navigation, divining the future and as a means to map boundaries (constellations often appear on boundary stones). Gurshtein [35] agrees that the goat-fish constellation has Sumerian origins. It is interesting to note that the goat-fish icon is called a suḫurmašû [32], whereas Capricorn is called SUHUR.MAS in tablets from Uruk [36].

The use of goat imagery in the artefacts described show the goat in association with the god Enki or Ea, and is used in libation vessels, temple furniture, plaques and votive objects used in the worship of this god. But, it should be noted that it is not the goat that is worshipped.

In literature too, although the goat is associated with the god Enki or Ea, it is the god in his human form that acts in the myths—not the god in animal form. The goat is used to represent the god in visual material or in association with him. This finding is corroborated by Breniquet [18] who states that in iconography, the animal is closely related to the god and acts as his substitute. Of more interest is her statement that the facial features or appearance (physiognomy) and behaviour are also those of the god. The animal is not merely an accessory, enabling the illiterate to interpret the portrayals; the placement of the animal with the god renders the reading unequivocal and is part of the essence of the god.

The Sumerian texts [16, 17] reveal that goats were considered intelligent, wise and cunning. The genetic characteristics of goats such as their ability to reproduce at a young age, their physical appearance (goatees) and their bawdiness are also alluded to in everyday proverbs. Goats are thus used as metaphors for intelligence, mischievousness, virility and fertility.

In each of the Mesopotamian myths described above, Ea or Enki plays the role of the wise god, offering solutions to a myriad of problems. He is described as the god ‘who knows everything’ and ‘the Lord of intelligence’. In the myth of Adapa, it may be suggested that the role of Ea ‘who knows everything’ is to show man that it is better not to have eternal life. Alternatively, here Ea could be assuming the role of the ‘trickster’ often ascribed to goats in later myth and alluded to again in the Aesopian-type dialogues with the lion and the fox in the Sumerian inscriptions shown above.

In the Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld, the role of Ea in creating a ‘playboy’ may allude to the sexual nature of goats. And again in the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal, the story has an overtly sexual nature.

It is suggested by Root [20] that the use of rhyton as libation vessels originated in the notion that imbibing liquid from a vessel resembling one of the more vital animals would magically convey some of the animal’s own vitality to the drinker. It is perhaps these qualities of intelligence and fertility that worshippers intended to obtain when drinking from rhyton shaped as goats or from libation devices decorated with goat motifs.

## 6. Conclusion

The depiction of goats in the art and literature of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures provides us with a means to understand man’s attitudes towards goats during this period in time. From the resources used, it is clear that goats fulfilled an immensely important utilitarian function. The heritage of Enki (Ea) as the constellation of Capricorn is significant. The use of goats in ritual and symbolism has provided us with many motifs related to goats that are still in use today: these include the motifs of fertility, intelligence and craftiness. From all accounts, Enki (Ea) was a benevolent god, always available to solve problems, and often assisting mankind to avert extinction. The imagery associated with Enki/Ea, as in the sacred tree, the sweet waters, the apotropaic suḥurmašû and ultimately the goat, communicates Enki as a symbol of life and an averter of evil.

These are powerfully hopeful and positive images.

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