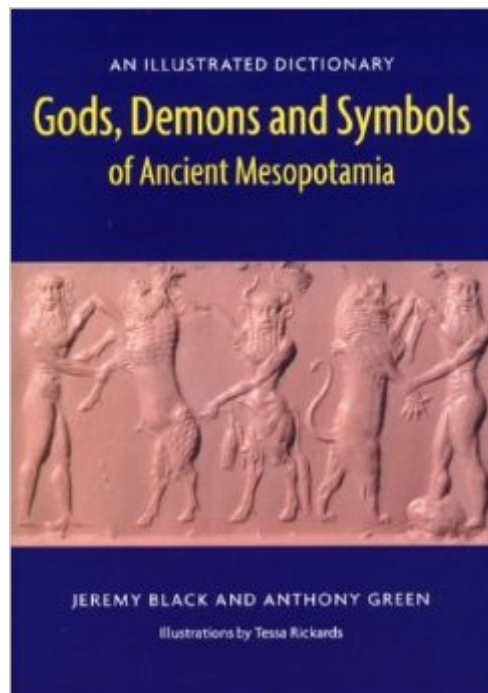


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Gods, Demons And Symbols Of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary



Synopsis

Ancient Mesopotamia was a rich, varied and highly complex culture whose achievements included the invention of writing and the development of sophisticated urban society. This book offers an introductory guide to the beliefs and customs of the ancient Mesopotamians, as revealed in their art and their writings between about 3000 B.C. and the advent of the Christian era. Gods, goddesses, demons, monsters, magic, myths, religious symbolism, ritual, and the spiritual world are all discussed in alphabetical entries ranging from short accounts to extended essays. Names are given in both their Sumerian and Akkadian forms, and all entries are fully cross-referenced. A useful introduction provides historical and geographical background and describes the sources of our knowledge about the religion, mythology and magic of "the cradle of civilisation".

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Customer Reviews

The book is setup just like a Dictionary with all the common Deities of Ancient(Sumer and Akkad only)Mesopotamia. All definitions have reference to other terms listed in bold letters somewhere in the defining paragraph. This makes cross referencing terms an easy goal to accomplish. The book does not include Egyptain, Canaanite, or Hittite Deities. However, there is a great companion volume to "Gods,Demon,and symbols in Ancient Mesopotamia" called "Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible" edited by Karel Van Der Toorn and for a complete book of all the Canaanite gods and stories that are availible try "Canaanite Myths and legends" by John Gibson. I have all three and they are a must for anyone doing research on the Ancient gods of The fertile Crescent.

I love books like this. Throughout the 190 pages of entries, covering everything from "animal sacrifice" to zodiac, cross-references are printed in bold text, prompting a butterfly style of reading that can be very illuminating (provided you do not lose track of your mental stack of things to look up). This "analog hypertext" presentation adds a new dimension of usefulness to the book. This book is closer to a brief encyclopedia than just an illustrated dictionary, as many of the articles go into considerable depth and contain editorial remarks on the validity of certain interpretations, e.g., "Although the all-embracing 'fertility cult' aspects of Mesopotamian myth and religion have certainly been exaggerated as a result of the anthropological climate of the 1950s and 1960s ...", (from the entry on "fertility"). The authors are prominent working scholars in the field, and the quality of articles upholds a very high standard. The book can be used as an introduction to the subject, or even more productively in conjunction with any of the more detailed references available, a few of which are listed in a very abbreviated bibliography in the present book. This brings me to my one disappointment with this book: the authors are not consistent in identifying sources. Scholars and religious reconstructors need to see things in context. As an amelioration, Dr. Black does run the online archive of Sumerian Literature ([...]), which provides a great and searchable source of original texts in both translation and phonetic original forms. Still, this is a "grab with gusto" title. You might want to buy two, in case you wear one out.

This is an excellent resource for anyone interested in Mesopotamian daily life and religion. It provides a quick reference to not just myths and gods, but also religious rites and magical practices. For example, you can look up "sacrifice" if you want to see what information there is on how the Mesopotamians went about such things. I think this helps to flesh out how the religion affected the daily lives of the people. It has a wealth of illustrations and drawings, something that is rather lacking in many books about Sumer. It also covers the evolution of the gods and cultures who worshipped them, instead of a simplistic "This was the god of X." It helps to know that some things were specific to Assyria or the early Sumerian Dynasties, which is important if you wish to avoid a homogenized 'Babylonianoid' stereotype of Mesopotamian history and religion. Our copy is already looking shabby from being read so much.

Even though I have read a number of books about ancient Mesopotamia, many of which are focussed on political and economic history rather than on beliefs and religious practices, I am still very confused about who were the principal gods and goddesses, during what period of time

and where they became prominent, and why they were worshipped. The uniformly positive customer reviews of this 192 page book were what persuaded me to buy it , and I was not disappointed. When I buy a book, however, I do prefer to read it from start to finish, so reading a dictionary in this way is somewhat difficult and it is probably not the best way to read this one. The "gods and goddesses " entry in this dictionary indicate that more than 3000 names have been recovered, and while the book doesn't attempt to describe all of these, it does provide a significant amount of interesting reference material about the beliefs and religious practices of the peoples of Ancient Mesopotamia. Perhaps it would be better to use the term "ruler" or "the elite" rather than the term "peoples" since it is clear that nearly all the available information about the gods, demons, and symbols comes from inscriptions which were either from the rulers or from the priests of the religious institutions. At the beginning of the book there is a useful author's note on the variant spellings of ancient names which explains the scholarly consensus on the probable pronunciation of the Akkadian and Sumerian languages. This is followed, by a concise introduction which provides summaries on the places and peoples of Mesopotamia, their mythology and legends, their art and iconography and the periods of the various dynasties and a helpful one page chronological table. At the end of the book there is also a short bibliography listing books recommended for further reading. The bulk of the book consists of about a thousand entries (I didn't count them) on the different deities, religious objects, icons, symbols, and practices, of the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia. Most of these are quite short, although there are a few which run to three or four pages. At least half of them refer to one or more illustrations which are liberally sprinkled throughout the book, and this approach definitely enhanced my understanding of what I was reading. I did get the impression, though, that much of the information about the earlier period comes from the Assyrian kings of the 1st millennium, and while they were heirs to the Sumerian and Akkadian traditions, it is still not clear to me how much of a bias they brought into their inscriptions in order to better serve their own interests. There are 159 illustrations in all, which are a mixture of drawings and very clear black and white photographs. The drawings by Tessa Rickards, the illustrator, are beautifully done, elegantly simple, and in my opinion, bring out the essence of the object of the illustration. While most illustrations are embedded in the text close to the most relevant entry, there are a number which are referred to by several different entries. I found it was quite time consuming to flip around the book to find the references of those which were not close by, so I ended up by using book markers to speed up my search for the most important, which were the groups of illustrations on demons, monsters, and symbols for the gods, and the genealogical table of gods and goddesses. Perhaps there is no way around this, but I think it would have been helpful if there

had been an index of the illustrations referenced by time period and page number. It may also have been easier to refer to them if they were included one place, perhaps at the back of the book. Notwithstanding these minor quibbles about the organization and content of the book, I found that reading it the way I did, was an effective and time efficient way of increasing my depth of knowledge about this aspect of ancient Mesopotamia. It will serve as a useful reference tool for my other books on the civilizations and dynasties of Mesopotamia, and I certainly recommend it to other students who are focussing their studies on this particular subject.

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