

# Old Chaldaean Gods Not Yet Dead

By FRANK THONE

The gods of old Babylonia are not yet dead.

Nineveh the mighty is a heap of ruins; the Assyrians who dwelt therein and looked with awe upon the great bearded and winged bulls of its gates are forgotten dust. Babylon, that rose before Nineveh, has fallen as low. Ur and Kish and Larsa and all the other cities of the Mesopotamian plain, whose tower-temples were once crowded with worshippers, are given over to the lion and the lizard.

But the beasts from whom their gods descended are still alive. In half a dozen European capitals that were mere hamlets of huts when Nineveh and Babylon were great, there are still a few of the original models from which the bearded bulls took their start. These are the Wisent, the old-world bison, a creature very closely related to the great animal of our own old West that gave Buffalo Bill his name.

It will come as a surprise to many Americans to know that Europe and Asia once had their counterpart of our old thundering herd, and that sixty centuries before Buffalo Bill rode the plains of Wyoming Territory, his prototype, Nimrod the son of Cush, "mighty hunter before the Lord", drove his arrows into their shaggy sides.

Yet so it was. Up in the hills of Elam, where Nimrod lived, there were many wisent; the prehistoric Elamite artists, who drew pictures of their food-animals on the walls of caverns for purposes of magic, made realistic likenesses of them. To them, as to primitive hunting peoples generally, pictures of animals were means of gaining control, insuring success in the chase, providing for the continuance and increase of a meat supply by pictures of the chief bull, the father of the herd.

Even in ancient Elam, animal painting in caverns was an art immemorably old: the Cro-Magnon artist-shamans practiced it 20,000 years or more ago in the caverns of France and northern Spain. And one of their favorite subjects was this same wisent.

The big bull bison came to be looked upon as quasi-supernatural. Meat was the source of life, and he was the source of meat. His attributes became the attributes of heroic manhood, and even of divinity. He had a big beard, so that a big beard became the



*WISENT in the Berlin Zoological Park. His ancestors were models for the god-makers of Elam and Chaldea*

sign of virility. His voice was like thunder, and his horns were like the new moon; what more natural than to seat him on the throne of heaven and put the lightning in his grasp? But that development came later, probably. We do not know what notions, if any, the early Elamites had of gods in heaven; for though they drew good pictures of animals and rather poor ones of men, they drew no pictures at all of gods.

The big bull wisent could also make a demigod out of a man. The mighty hunter who prevailed against him lived for many generations in tradition. Gilgamesh, king of Erech (wherever that was), seems to have been another Nimrod. Perhaps he was Nimrod under an alias. At any rate, he had a companion as heroic as himself, one Enkidu, who was very literally a bull-headed man—like the Minotaur of Greek legend. Enkidu was either a man who became identified with the wisent overlord, or a wisent who became partly human.

The shadowy beginnings of this cult of the wisent all took place in prehistoric Elam, which occupied a part of what is now western Persia.

The early Elamites were the ancestors of the Sumerians, who founded the first city-states in Mesopotamia not long after the Flood. The Flood, new evidence recently uncovered at

Ur indicates, took place about 3600 B. C. It did not cover the whole earth, but it did devastate the Tigris-Euphrates valley, sweeping away the early inhabitants and leaving the land empty.

Into this fertile, unpopulated, level country flowed the people of Elam, founding the Sumerian cities of Ur and Kish and beginning the first civilization of Mesopotamia. Pre-history passed into history, for the Sumerians invented cuneiform writing and left records of their religious beliefs and heroic legends on tablets of clay. Their artists developed a high degree of skill in sculpture, and especially in metal working, as witness the beautiful animal figures discovered at Ur, the home town of Abraham the patriarch, by the joint expedition of the University of Pennsylvania and the British Museum.

Image-making was a highly practical art in the ancient Mesopotamian cities. Amulets played a large part in religion, and the clay documents of trade and government had to be impressed with the engraved seals of their executors. Tradition hath it that Abraham's father was a dealer in idols, and that Abraham decided to leave Ur because he was sick of the whole business.

But skillful as the Mesopotamian artists became, (*Turn to next page*)

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*MAN-HEADED BULLS and bull-headed men, on the seal of an ancient Sumerian king*

they soon lost the realism in depicting the divine or semidivine wisent their ancestors had known in Elam. When a civilization reaches a high level, art somehow tends to become conventional, sophisticated, stylized: witness "the modernist" or "contemporary" art of our own time. Although the Sumerians and Akkadians lived a long time ago they were nevertheless highly civilized, and their art suffered accordingly.

Even more important, perhaps, was the fact that they no longer knew what a wisent looked like. There were no wisent in the plains country; all they had to go by were copies of copies of copies, handed down from one generation to another. The artists were no longer certain that there ever had been such an animal in the flesh; it might have been just a traditional creature like a unicorn or a griffon, or like one of the lion-headed eagles which they themselves were fond of depicting. So the wisent became more and more conventionalized, and as he passed from the hands of the Sumerians to those of the Babylonians and from them to the Assyrians, he shifted farther and farther from the shaggy wild animal of the hills. He became, first, a domestic bull with a beard; then a domestic bull with a false beard obviously tied over his nose. Finally, in Nineveh, thirty centuries removed from the primitive realists of Elam, he was magnified to a super-heroic size, even the figure of the domestic bull was conventionalized into the heavy lines of a draft horse, and his head had become the head of a crowned, wigged and full-bearded human monarch, with the horns indicated merely as upward-curving lines on his tiara.

The evolution is traceable through

the art of the various city-states that successively dominated the Mesopotamian plain. The earliest seals and images show the wisent as a real animal; conventionalized, it is true, but still definitely recognizable. The seal of King Lugal-Anda of Kish, who reigned not long after 3000 B. C., shows three of these animals, rampant and presenting their full faces. These have somewhat "humanized" features; but if you will look at the face of a bison in your municipal zoological garden you will see that it does not require a very great stretch of imagination to give it the big nose and full lips of human types you occasionally see on your own side of the fence.

On the same seal, which depicts a sort of battle royal between animals and demigods, there is the figure of a man who seems to show the effect of association with the wisent with which he is wrestling. His head is almost as heavily haired and bearded as those of the animals, but his nose is not so heavy, and he has no horns. Another near-human figure has the nose and lips of a man, but the ears, horns and body of a bull.

Two of the steps in the conventionalization of the now legendary wisent are found together in the famous Queen's Grave recently unearthed at Ur. One of the little amulets from the Queen's coronet is that of a stylized wisent, with the beard grown fast to the face but carefully arranged and perhaps braided. Another figure from the same ornament is that of an obvious domestic bull, with a false beard apparently tied on its nose. The same kind of an animal head with a false beard tied on formed the decoration of a harp found in the same burial. This is a splendid piece of gold-work, and one of the real prizes of the expedition.

This false beard tied under a tame bull's chin with a string has already aroused some discussion among archaeologists. C. Leonard Woolley, of the British Museum expedition, considers it the sign of a sort of pre-Christian communion service. He says:

"The subject is new and admits of only one interpretation. The bull is, of course, a regular symbol for the god, supports his throne, and is the victim preferred for his sacrifices. The beard is essentially the attribute of divinity. The animal destined for sacrifice can, by the addition of a beard, be transformed into the very god himself, the great bull of Heaven, who gives his flesh to his worshippers to eat in true communion. Such a rite actually performed in the temple with the living beast must be represented by the amulet."

Mr. Woolley's colleague, Dr. L. Le-grain of the University of Pennsylvania, sees the animal in a different light:

"Is it not simpler to place this bull in the same category as Enkidu and the man-headed bison, than to hang the whole communion service on that beard and string? Many animals besides the bull were offered in sacrifice to the gods. The horns and not the beard are essentially an attribute of divinity."

The Sumerians found it hard to forget the wisent of their hill-dwelling hunter ancestors; but the later peoples who came into the plain of the two rivers and learned civilization from Ur had no such difficulty. They had never known the wisent at first hand, and received its images from their instructors as a tradition only. Hence its transformation in the hands of the Babylonians and Assyrians, the latter a people as remote in time from early Kish and Ur as we are from the Rome of Julius Caesar. It is no wonder then that the majestic bulls of Assyria looked so little like their prototypes of Elam.

One factor besides tradition is involved in the insistence of the Assyrians that their guardian bulls be full-bearded. The Assyrians were the Romans of the East—a warlike, conquering, slave-holding people. They had many eunuchs, and in Nineveh beardlessness was the stigma of a eunuch. A man, a warrior, especially a king, had to have a full beard, combed and curled and pomaded. There were (*Turn to next page*)

# Wood Alcohol Blindness Needs Study

The story of the blindness that comes from wood alcohol has not yet been completely told. A further study of this problem might well be made by the newly dedicated Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute in Baltimore, Dr. George E. DeSchweinitz of the University of Pennsylvania suggested in his address at the dedication exercises.

Physicians now generally believe that it is not the wood alcohol but some impurity in it, possibly fusel oil, which is nearly always found in commercial wood alcohol, that causes the blindness. The bad liquor prevalent in recent years often contains wood alcohol and has been the cause of much wood alcohol poisoning and blindness. However, wood alcohol may also be inhaled or it may be absorbed through the skin. This is an important hazard in certain industrial operations.

The dedication of the new Wilmer Institute, devoted to the study and treatment of eye diseases, Dr. DeSchweinitz considered an outstanding contribution to American ophthalmology, which is the branch of medicine devoted to the eye. Other landmarks mentioned by this famous eye specialist were the invention of bifocal glasses by Benjamin Franklin in 1764; and the establishment of the first eye infirmary in this country at New London, Conn., in 1870.

One of the first operations for cataract performed in this country was done by Edward Reynolds of Boston. On his return from Europe, where he had been studying the eye and its diseases, he found his father suffering from cataract. According to his own statement, he "went to his surgery, offered a prayer to the Deity, took a glass of sherry and went ahead to do his best."

Routine examination and care of the eyes of all patients entering the hospital first was established in this country at the hospital of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School by Dr. Charles Norris of that institution. This was a particularly important step in the development of ophthalmology, Dr. DeSchweinitz pointed out. He declared that further development of this medical specialty would come through further cooperation between eye specialist, regular physician and pathologist, the latter being the specialist who studies in the laboratory the changes brought about in the body's tissues by disease. Conditions at the new Wilmer Institute are particularly fortunate both for the individual patient and for the development of the science of ophthalmology.

*Science News-Letter, October 26, 1929*

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never such beards in the world before, neither have there been any since, as were worn by the men of Assyria.

In the meantime, the wisent, forgotten by the high civilizations of antiquity, or remembered only as a legend or apotheosized into the Mesopotamian pantheon, lived on in the dark parts of the map; the plains of Greater Asia and the forests of Europe. When the western world began to stir, under Greece and Rome, he was occasionally noticed by some curious traveler. Tacitus, for example, mentions him. But there is really very little about him in the literature of classical antiquity.

In the Middle Ages two or three writers took notice of him. Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century, the greatest naturalist between Aristotle and modern times, described the wisent as though he had seen him at first hand, distinguished him from the aurochs, the now extinct gigantic wild ox of the forests, and set down his range as not extending beyond the eastern part of Germany. The wisent was apparently still abundant in Europe.

At the beginning of the present century the wisent herds had dwindled greatly, due partly to hunting and partly to the taking over of their original range for pasture and plowland by the increasing population.



*BULL AMULET, with artificial beard, from the Queen's grave, at Ur*

But there were still probably more wisent in the old world than there were bison in the new. The Czar had a private game preserve in Esthonia, where there was a comparatively large herd; and there was a still larger herd, of possibly 1,100 head, on crown lands in the Caucasus. There were also a few individual animals scattered among the zoological gardens in western European capitals.

Then came the World War. The trampling of armies, and the starva-

tion times of the war and post-war period, played havoc with the Esthonian herd. Not a single animal was left alive. A couple of years ago the Soviet government sent an expedition into the Caucasus to hunt up the 1,100 animals supposed to be there. They could not find one. That herd also is probably wiped out, the work of undisciplined local tribesmen.

The sole remaining hope of keeping the species alive now rests with the fifty or sixty surviving in public and private collections in northwestern Europe, mostly in Germany, the Baltic countries and England. An international society for their preservation has been established.

The situation of the wisent is admittedly serious, but not hopeless, unless an epidemic of some bovine ailment, such as hoof and mouth disease, cuts down the stock too drastically. The splendid herd of American bison now in Yellowstone National Park, numbering about a thousand head, was started from a bull and a few cows owned by a western rancher a generation or so ago. The much larger bison herd in Canada was similarly founded. So the friends of the wisent in Europe still hope to save alive the great beast that Nimrod knew in Elam, and whose very memory was a thing of awe in Babylon the mighty and in Nineveh.

*Science News-Letter, October 26, 1929*