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Religion in Ancient Iraq: Ritual and Divinity in Early Mesopotamia

This project will analyze the worship of divine statues in ancient Iraq from an indigenous Mesopotamian perspective. At the center of this study is the daily ritual of feeding the gods, which will offer an entry into discussing central aspects related to religious worship, beliefs, gender, and socio-economic contexts of religious systems. A detailed study of this ritual will allow a new understanding of the Mesopotamian notions of divinity, society, gender, and economics.

Modern scholarship of ritual food offerings has been heavily influenced by Biblical polemics against idol worship. Therefore, this project has the potential to illuminate and further our understanding of a wide range of information on key aspects of ancient Mesopotamian religion, society, and economy:

- 1) Divinity: It was not only the numerous gods and goddesses in their various aspects who received foods; sacred objects, too, were presented with foods. This indicates that in ancient Mesopotamia, divinity could not only inhabit (or be embodied in) divine statues, which became the deity, it could also be transferred to other objects that were in proximity to the god. This observation needs to be studied further to fully comprehend its significance.
- 2) Economics: The economic and bureaucratic administration of food offerings required an enormous organizational effort. Who provided the food offerings? What happened with the food offerings after they had been consumed by the gods? There are indications that foods were redistributed to dignitaries within the ancient communities, yet it remains to be determined whether redistributions were economically or religiously significant (or both).
- 3) Society and Gender: Many of the most important priestly offices in ancient Mesopotamia were held by women. In fact, some of the complex administration of food offerings was the task of priestesses. The important role of women in religion has often been dismissed; in fact, male scholars designated many priestesses "temple prostitutes" instead of trying to understand the religious and economic roles that these elite women occupied in early Mesopotamian society. Thus, a fresh look at the evidence allows for a critical re-evaluation of priestesses and their importance for ancient Mesopotamian religion and society.

Recommended Reading

Brisch, Nicole. "To Eat Like a God: Religion and Economy in Old Babylonian Nippur." In *At the Dawn of History: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of J. N. Postgate*, edited by Yagmur Heffron, Adam Stone, and Martin Worthington, 43-53. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2017.

-. "Of Gods and Kings: Divine Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia." *Religion Compass* 7, 2 (2013): 37-46. doi: 10.1111/rec3.12031.

-. "Changing Images of Kingship in Sumerian Literature." In *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, edited by Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, 706-724. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Feeding Gods and Goddesses: Religion and Ritual in Early Mesopotamia

In ancient Mesopotamia, gods and goddesses were embodied in statues that were brought to life through mouth-opening and mouth-washing rituals. Once alive, the statues had to be given food and drink daily. This daily ritual of feeding the gods is at the center of my research project, because it offers an opportunity to study societal, gender-related, religious, and economic aspects of religious beliefs in one of the most ancient literate societies in world history.

Previous studies of Mesopotamian religion have either focused on the rich mythologies written in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages or relegated Mesopotamian beliefs to a "primitive" or "prehistoric" stage of human religious history. In part this is due to the close contacts to the Biblical world, in which Mesopotamian beliefs and forms of worship were polemically described as "idol worship."

It is the goal of my project at Wiko to use the ritual of feeding the gods to argue that it is not productive to approach religious history from a social evolutionary perspective. While my research focuses on the divine statue/body, I disregard art historical aspects and instead focus on the role that the ritual of feeding the gods played in society. I will illustrate this by discussing two points in detail, one related to the religious agents, in particular women in priestly offices, and the second connected to economic aspects of this worship.

1) Religious agents: in early Mesopotamia (3rd and early 2nd millennia BCE), women were frequently employed in priestly offices. Through their positions, women acquired social but also a certain degree of economic power. I will illustrate this with several individual examples. I will use these examples to critically examine modern scholarship that has often interpreted these women as having served as sacred prostitutes in temples.

2) Economy and society: to this day, scholars debate whether ancient the Mesopotamian economy was profoundly different from modern economies (in particular, debates revolve around the existence of markets and whether the economy was profit-oriented or whether social relations were more important). While it will not be possible to solve this debate within the framework of my project, I will attempt to shed light on the role that religion may have played in the Mesopotamian economy. The daily offerings to the gods involved a substantial economic expense; not only temples, but also kings and ordinary people contributed to these food offerings. The food offerings were subsequently redistributed; what does this tell us about the function of food offerings for the community and for individuals?

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Studies in ancient Near Eastern records ; volume 30

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The marginalization of priestesses in ancient Mesopotamia

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