Humans and Animals in Ancient Mesopotamia: a study of the animal imagery

The study is a systematic investigation focusing on the human-animal relationship in Mesopotamia. While investigating the human understanding and use of animal imagery in an ancient society, it will shed light on the questions how animals were conceptualized in the Mesopotamian world view. It is noteworthy, that the ancients used animal imagery in a wide contextual variety, forming a relationship more fundamental and complex, than the modern understanding concerning the role of animals in a society.

The dissertation brings new light into the investigation of Mesopotamian animal terminology and taxonomy. The study investigates the general words for the classes of animals and the animal taxonomy in the lexical tradition. It resolves problems connected with the species categorization including also the taxonomy of mythological animals, homophonic terms designating numerous species, and other problematic categories.

The major theme in the dissertation will be the relationship between humans and animals illustrated in the literature. In the investigation Mesopotamian fables, proverbs, epics, and royal inscriptions are used to illustrate how animals are exploited in Sumerian and Akkadian imagery. The study will concern the metaphoric and comparative use of animals in the source material. The chapters focusing on the fables and proverbs will illustrate the nature and character associated with different animals. Finally, the relationship between the kings and animals, illustrated in the royal inscriptions and pictorial evidence, will be investigated.

The study will also provide a systematic research on three micro-themes – animals in the personal names, animals used as characteristic of different landscapes and animals associated with, or portrayed as deities. For all of them, a systematic analysis will be conducted and for the latter two themes also the pictorial evidence will be investigated.

The last theme will focus on the threat that animals imposed upon humans and around the human response to this threat. This aspect is best illustrated in the incantations, divination and nanburbis. The anthropocentric quality, to see and understand animals as something that could give relevant information from the human perspective, is human universal – present in all the world cultures in one form or another. For this reason the study will be investigating the material as a source of information concerning this universal feature and to better understand how humans resolved the threat that animals created.

The research will be conducted as a cross-cultural study that investigates the similarities and differences in the Mesopotamian attitudes with the contemporaries and the later Greco-Roman world. Special space will allotted with the differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt, especially in the association of animals with the deities.