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Mountains and Trees,
Rivers and Springs

Animistic Beliefs and Practices
in ancient Mesopotamian Religion

2019

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Introduction

1 Introduction

This book explores how mountains, rivers, trees and plants were conceived of within the ancient Mesopotamian religious framework. At the heart of this book is the question: How was nature conceived of and engaged with by the ancient Mesopotamians? To answer this question, I base my analysis on reading the ancient myths, rituals, incantations, and other textual evidence dealing with religious life, through the lens of the current discourse on animism and anthropology of nature. The book sets out to shed new light onto some notions of divinity, personhood and nature in ancient Mesopotamian religion.

In ancient Mesopotamian myths and rituals, natural elements are referred to as living beings, acting in the world and partaking of the divine community. Mountains protect and heal, do not submit to deities and threaten them with their beauty, radiance and divinity. Rivers flow from the eyes of a dead watery god, establish verdicts and remove every evil, disease and impurity with their powerful waters. Sulphur, the daughter of the heavenly god Anu, and the tamarisk, the bone of the deity, are invoked for purifying and healing. The palm tree occurs as an emblem of the king and is referred to as a brother. This evidence speaks for different understandings of divinity, personhood and nature on the part of ancient Mesopotamians, as reflected by the literary and religious sources, and calls into question the various ways in which they related to, understood and conceptualized their natural surroundings and sacred landscape.

This study uncovers some modalities of the relationships between humans and non-humans by studying how mountains, rivers and trees were embedded within the ancient Mesopotamian religious framework. While exploring the ancient cuneiform-writing cultures, I use anthropological explanations to better understand the ancient myths and rituals, in order to investigate and further explain the connection between nature, the sacred and their materiality. I focus on the ongoing anthropological discussion over the term animism, with its innovative notion of personhood, which I apply as a conceptual tool in order to explore the ways in which the ancient Mesopotamians engaged with the major topographical entities and most attested vegetal and arboreal inhabitants of their landscape.

2 Scope of this study and the current state of research

This book explores a precise group of natural elements (i.e. mountains, rivers and trees), with their associated entities (i.e. anthropomorphic gods, *Mischwesen*,¹ animals and threatening agents), in the genres of myths and incantations belonging to ritual literature. These literary and religious sources can offer only one of several possible perspectives into the different and multifaceted ways in which the ancient Mesopotamians engaged with and conceptualized their natural surroundings. Mountains, rivers and trees have been chosen because they evince a synergic and entangled relationship throughout the literary sources. These natural elements are often recorded together in a dense network of symbolic and religious meanings: they are not only closely connected with one another but also with the great gods of the panthea, and with the divine and cosmic realms. In mythology, the mountain is portrayed as an organism inhabited by different entities: watercourses, trees and plants are the most prominent inhabitants of the mountainous landscape, together with stones, animals, legendary creatures and the gods. A particular entanglement between mountains, trees and rivers is on display in the cosmology of the eastern and western horizons: the divine River is closely associated with the mountains and their trees, and with the Sun in its daily journey over the horizon from east to west. In the incantations, these natural elements are invoked together: their agency and healing properties are called upon in the performance of ritual, displaying a complex religious connection between one another. Mountains, rivers and trees should thus be considered together, because they constitute a fertile repository of religious meanings in the eyes of the ancients, while participating in the physical and cosmic landscape of ancient Mesopotamia.

My book, *Mountains and Trees, Rivers and Springs*, explores these natural elements in order to describe the human-environmental relationships in Ancient Mesopotamian religion and literature in the light of the current debate about new animism and anthropology of religions. I claim that a general reassessment of the symbolic, literary and ritualistic roles of mountains, rivers and trees is necessary in order to shed new light onto the emic conceptualizations of nature, landscape, divinity, and personhood, while promoting the understanding and studying of the ancient Near Eastern religions as lived and material religions. This study revolves around the following intertwined questions:

1) **Personhood.** What is the evidence that the natural elements were considered as having agency and personality? Which roles are ascribed to them in the religious life of the ancient Mesopotamians? So far, in the Assyriological studies the matter of agency of different elements has been referred to as mere *materia magica* and *medica* within the magical and therapeutic performance. Indeed, the matter of magic has been constantly under discussion, pointing out the analogical thinking characterizing the ritual performance (e.g. Heßel; Schwemer; Rochberg), but a more organic assessment of the so-called *materia magica* (i.e. plants, stones, animals, and man-made objects) that occur consistently in the rituals and myths is lacking.

2) **Divinity.** Were mountains, rivers and trees considered holy and/or regarded as deities? Were they conceived of as belonging to the divine world? How did they engage

1 The term *Mischwesen* refers to hybrid mythological creatures.

and relate with the great gods of the Mesopotamian panthea and with the cosmic realms? In order to explore the divinity and/or sacrality of mountains, rivers and trees, I consider whether they were worshipped, received offerings, and/or rites were held for them, both in the urban and temple context or immersed in nature. The traditional understanding of deity and divine (Bottéro 2001), Jacobsen's concepts of immanence and intransitiveness (Jacobsen 1946; Jacobsen 1976), Lambert's article about the non-anthropomorphic deities (1990), and the notions of "holistic embedded elements" within the "hegemonic and theistic cosmos" (Wiggermann and van Binsbergen 1999) are all essential steps that have paved the way to reconsider these natural elements within the ancient Mesopotamian lived and material religion. I base my methodology on Porter's article in the edited volume *What is a God?* (2009). This book deals specifically with the ancient emic notions of divine and divinity, pointing out that natural elements were part of the divine cosmos, and arguing for a necessary reassessment of the ancient Mesopotamian understandings of divinity and nature.

3) **Landscape and Cosmos.** The above-mentioned questions raise the consequent query about how the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians perceived and conceptualized their environment, landscape and cosmos. Is it possible to reconstruct one or more sacred landscapes and religious topographies of ancient Mesopotamia? A renewed interest in the ancient Mesopotamian conceptualizations about nature, landscape and environment has been thriving in the last few decades. Horowitz's seminal study *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Horowitz 1998) has brought new insights into the ancient Mesopotamian conceptualizations of the earthly and cosmic realms. Specifically on the landscape of Sumerians, Black's article (Black 2002) considers the Sumerian mythical evidence with the different environmental settings of Southern Iraq, distinguishing the more familiar marshes of the fluvial plain and the coastal area from the steppe and the mountainous areas of the Zagros. More recently, Rendu-Loisel's book *Les Chants du monde* (2016) offers a unique portrayal of the auditory landscape of ancient Mesopotamia as mirrored by the literary evidence, bringing the dimension of sound into the studies of landscape and nature as an essential feature. However, a study entirely devoted to mountains, rivers and trees in the polytheisms of ancient Mesopotamia is a desideratum.

4) **Nature.** All these threads intertwine with the core question upon which this research revolves: How did the ancient Mesopotamians know, conceptualize, and engage with what we call nature? Did they have such a concept? And, did they distinguish a clear dichotomy between cultural and natural, natural and supernatural, subject and object, immanent and transcendent? In this direction, new research is flourishing in several disciplines, including those studying the ancient world and the broader field of history and anthropology of religions. Rochberg's groundbreaking book *Before Nature. Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* (2016) explores some human-environmental relationships in the cuneiform world, aiming at assessing the *Sitz im Leben* of cuneiform knowledge within the history of science, while considering the emic concepts of nature before the notion of 'nature' existed as such. Pertaining to the Biblical World, Mari Jørstad's soon to be published dissertation, *The Life of the World: The Vitality and Personhood of Non-Animal Nature in the Hebrew Bible* (2016), argues that the biblical writers lived in a world populated with a wide variety of "persons," only some of whom are human. In consequence of such evidence, history should be understood as not merely a

human enterprise, but a cooperative venture between humans, their landscapes, and the monotheistic God.² In the literature about Indian religions, David Haberman's books, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution. The Yamuna River of Northern India* (2007), and *People Trees. Worship of Trees in Northern India* (2013), are essential steps forward not only for the history of the religions of India, but also for the broader discussion of ecological ethics in religious traditions past and present. Accordingly, the centuries-old devotion to the goddess Yamuna not only draws an intriguing picture of the diverse conceptions and theologies concerning the river deity, but also provides the conceptual and philosophical tools which could lead to necessary ecological action. Haberman's study of the sacred trees of India highlights the understanding and perception of trees as persons: this notion is widely shared by different cultures past and present, and is confirmed by contemporary biological and botanical studies.³ These insights provide different modalities for relating to and engaging with our natural surroundings within the religious traditions, and represent some possible solutions for facing the environmental challenges of the contemporary world.

As part of this new wave of scholarly interest in the relationships of humans and the non-human, and human and nature, my research inserts and fills a consistent lacuna by readdressing how the ancient Mesopotamians conceptualized and related to their natural surroundings and their inhabitants, especially with reference to the mountains, rivers and vegetal beings which recur in Mesopotamian mythology and magic. These natural elements have been neglected for too long and considered as mere relics embedded into the anthropomorphic panthea, and the time is ripe for them to be reconsidered as a vital and essential part of the Mesopotamian religious experience. Considering mountains, rivers, trees and plants which are addressed as "other-than-human" persons, as deities and as cosmic entities participating in the divine and relational cosmos of the ancient Mesopotamians, is a step forward to readdressing and shedding light on their emic notions of divinity, nature and personhood, while contributing to reconsidering relevant aspects of the ancient Near Eastern history of religions. At the same time, it aims to contribute to the current discourse on animism, personhood and the anthropology of nature, the relevance of which is destined to increase exponentially due to the environmental crisis of our times.

3 Sources and methodology

In the attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the Mesopotamian religious views of mountains, rivers and trees, my study is intentionally cross-generic and utilizes texts from different periods. I explore diverse types of sources written in Sumerian and Akkadian between the 3rd and 1st millennium B.C.E., with the focus on texts dealing with the religious sphere. The sources examined are all edited, and I utilize the most up-to-date transliterations available, for which I offer my new translations.

2 <http://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2017/12/30/dissertation-spotlight-mari-jrstad>.

3 Hall 2011; Hall 2013; Rival 1998. For some popular scientific works on the life and communication of trees see the books of Wohlleben 2015; Wohlleben 2017; Mancuso/Viola 2013; Mancuso 2018; Mancuso 2019.

My research centers on the textual genres of myths and incantations. Mythology represents the main core of the documentation that has been explored. The relevant Sumerian mythic and epic compositions *Inana and Ebiḥ*,⁴ *Inana and Šukaletuda*,⁵ *Lugale* or “Ninurta and the Stones”,⁶ *Enki and the World Order*,⁷ *Enlil and Ninlil*,⁸ and the epics *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*,⁹ *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*,¹⁰ and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*¹¹ are studied in the contexts of their multifaceted literary and religious worlds.¹² The epic of Gilgameš in its Sumerian¹³ and Akkadian versions is considered.¹⁴ Other significant Akkadian myths and epics are the *Enūma eliš*,¹⁵ *Atraḥasīs*,¹⁶ the myth of *Anzū*,¹⁷ *Etana* and *Adapa*,¹⁸ and further related texts (e.g. the *Song of Bazi*).¹⁹ Incantations constitute the other major and complementary literary genre which is examined in this book. These literary sources are part of Mesopotamian ritual literature, and help shed light on magico-religious conceptions, beliefs and practices, both scholarly and popular. Sumerian and Akkadian incantations are studied, starting from the incantations of earlier periods (Ur III and Old Babylonian) and reaching the more complex ritual series and professional handbooks of the 1st millennium B.C.E. The older material is heterogeneous and consists mainly of single incantations addressing different demons and diseases (e.g. *utukkū lemnūtu*, *Lamaštu*), witchcraft, the evil eye and animals (e.g. dogs, scorpions).²⁰ The incantations are often bilingual and represent the complex world of magic in the 3rd and 2nd millennium B.C.E. As for the ritual compositions of the 1st millennium B.C., the study explores the main ritual series, especially *Maqlū*²¹, *Šurpu*,²² and *Mīs pi*,²³ together with their related texts. Also, the *Lipšur Litanies*, with their invocation of mountains and rivers, constitute essential evidence.²⁴ When relevant and complementary to the mythical and

4 See Attinger 1998; Attinger 2015a.

5 See Volk 1995.

6 See van Dijk 1983; Seminara 2001.

7 See Kramer/Maier 1989; Mittermayer 2012.

8 See Steible 2015.

9 See Wilcke 2015.

10 See Wilcke 2015.

11 See Mittermayer 2009.

12 For comprehensive studies on Sumerian literature see also the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL); Bottéro/Kramer 1989; Kramer/Maier 1989; Black/Cunningham/Robson/Zólyomi 2004; Volk 2015.

13 *Gilgameš and Aga*, *Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven*, *The Death of Gilgameš*, *Gilgameš*, *Enkidu and the Netherworld*, and *Gilgameš and Huwawa*.

14 George 2003.

15 Lambert 2013.

16 Lambert/Millard, 1969.

17 Vogelzang 1988.

18 Izre’el 2001.

19 George 2009, 1–15.

20 Geller 1985; Finkel/Geller 1997; Abusch/van der Toorn 1999. My main source for the Old Babylonian, Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian incantations is constituted by the online database SEAL (*Sources of the Early Akkadian Literature*).

21 Abusch/Schwemer 2011; Abusch 2015a.

22 Reiner 1958.

23 Walker/Dick 2001.

24 Reiner 1956, 129–149.

ritualistic material, the evidence offered by the repertoires of hymns, prayers, lexical lists (i.e. An=Anum), onomastic and offering lists, is considered and included in this study.

The literary sources are studied according to their contexts (literary, geographical and chronological), and across genres, time and space, in order to offer an organic picture of how mountains, rivers and trees were conceptualized over the course of time, according to literary genres and local traditions, aiming at detecting and following their essential and various features, along with the changes. Moreover, iconographical sources, such as seals, reliefs and statues, are taken into account as evidence complementary to the written material. In fact, some visual representations can better explain the ancient Mesopotamian conceptualizations of natural elements, especially of Mountain and River deities.

Methodologically, this study employs both the standard tools of Assyriological studies, combined with anthropological theory, in particular from the schools of structuralism, post-structuralism, and the new animism. The methodology pertinent to the philological approach to the ancient Mesopotamian literary sources consists of detecting and selecting the natural elements in the above-mentioned sources, of reading them carefully in the most up-to-date editions available, translating them, and studying them both contextually and diachronically in the light of the religious and anthropological theories.

Specifically, on the question of divinity ascribed to the natural elements in the cuneiform world, I utilize Porter (2009). Porter notices that certain natural phenomena and material objects are differently referred to as divine in the ancient cuneiform sources. Accordingly, the textual evidence is analyzed through an emic perspective, based on the three different ways non-anthropomorphic deities were identified in the sources:²⁵ 1) they are either explicitly said to be DINGIRs or *ilus* or to behave in ways characteristic of DINGIRs and *ilus*; 2) they are labeled as gods by the determinative DINGIR, the cuneiform sign which is placed before names referring to divinity; 3) and/or they are identified as DINGIRs by receiving a treatment reserved for gods, e.g. being recipients for food offerings or being utilized as theophoric elements in personal names.²⁶

In exploring the ancient cuneiform cultures, I use a combination of anthropological theories applied to the ancient religious sources, in order to explore and offer new interpretations about religion and nature. I utilize the term animism as argued for and promoted by the school of new animism (Bird-David 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1992; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Harvey 2006; Harvey 2013a, Harvey 2013b; Descola 1996; Descola 2005; Descola 2013), especially in its innovative notion of “other-than-human” person (Hallowell 1960; Harvey 2006; Harvey 2013a, Harvey 2013b; Hall 2011; Hall 2013). With the dismissal of the classic use of the term animism, a new usage of the term has come into being. According to the new animism, in some societies (or in some worldviews within a given society), the world is perceived and conceptualized as a relational and social one, as a “community of living beings” (Harvey 2013a; Harvey 2013b), populated by different persons, most of whom are non-human. The new animism highlights radically different understandings of divinity, person, and nature, calling into question the dualistic naturalistic worldview, with its oppositions of animate and inanimate, natural and cultural, natural and supernatural, immanent and transcendent (Latour 1993;

²⁵ Porter 2009, 161.

²⁶ Porter 2009, 161.

Descola 1996; Descola 2013). The predominant Western naturalistic mode of interaction with nature does not match the whole evidence attested in the cuneiform sources. Thus, animism represents a fertile conceptual tool to shed light upon relevant aspects of the relationship between humans and non-humans, which can illuminate various aspects of an ancient culture, distant from us in time and place, that has left us an unprecedented richness of written sources, while simultaneously bringing Assyriological studies into the broader current anthropological debate around religion, magic and nature.

Concerning the question of the applicability of anthropological methods and approaches to the study of such an ancient culture, I consider it a challenge and an opportunity to try to explore some aspects of how ancient human communities, far off in time and place, envisioned, knew and related to their world. In the field of Assyriology such approaches have been a matter of concern among the scholars ever since Landsberger asked a question destined to become famous: “To what extent is it possible to reconstruct vividly and faithfully an ancient, alien civilizations by philological means, without the help of a tradition continuing down to the present day?”.²⁷ This question is at the very core of the problem of understanding the otherness by means of written records. As pointed out by Rochberg, this matter poses several challenges, but such an approach is required for anyone attempting to interpret and explore those societies, according to the different written sources.²⁸ Thanks to the advance of philological and linguistic understandings of the cuneiform sources, with the consequent flourishing of editions of different textual corpora, the ancient Mesopotamian documentation has become more easily available and awaits further studies on the *Sitz im Leben* of the ancient Mesopotamians. Hence, the anthropological methodology should not be assumed as establishing anachronistic and uncritical parallels between an ancient culture and a non-Western one, rather it should be utilized to explore different ways of interpreting the written sources while enhancing the dismantling of those Western dichotomies that influence us.²⁹ In the case of my study, the anthropological term animism offers one point of view through which to look at the multifaceted world of the ancient Mesopotamians, especially concerning the relationship between humans and nature, in the particular and circumscribed literary genres of myths and rituals.

4 Synopsis and findings

This book comprises five chapters, two methodological and theoretical, and three philological with some iconographical evidence when relevant. Chapter I contextualizes the *status quaestionis* of the current discourse revolving around the concept of animism, and of the place and consideration of mountains, rivers and trees within the ancient Mesopotamian

27 See Landsberger’s inaugural lecture at Leipzig University in 1924, that was entitled “Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt” (quoted in Rochberg 2016, 43).

28 Rochberg 2016.

29 Rochberg 2016.