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The archaeology of private religion in ancient Mesopotamia

Much is known about public religion in ancient Mesopotamia. Large impressive temples placed on platforms and towering ziggurats shaped the skyline even from afar, clearly marking public sacred space. Along with extensive administrative archives recording many details of temple administration and ritual calendars, these are some of the hallmarks of Mesopotamian culture. Festivals, patron deities and the main elements of the pantheon are thus well-documented, and much has been written about them by modern scholars. Private religion has received much less attention, not least because it did not require detailed record-keeping, and has therefore left a much smaller textual legacy. Traditionally, the archaeology of households and other private areas have not been the focus of excavations, although this has changed increasingly over the last few decades.

This project will examine private religion through a systematic spatial and contextual analysis of the archaeology of private sacred spaces that have been excavated to date. Such spaces consist of shrines and sanctuaries located among or closely associated with domestic areas or 'neighbourhoods', as well as religious installations within households (for example altars and offering tables, foundation deposits and tombs below houses). These provide evidence for regular interaction with the divine sphere, supernatural elements, and ancestors.

Sites from both southern and northern Mesopotamia will be investigated, including Ur, Mari, Ebla, Tell Asmar and Abu Salabikh, among others. Beside the architectural evidence, the material culture associated with the performance of ritual in such spaces will be analysed, in particular votive figurines and remains of offerings. While the focus will be on the archaeological and material culture remains, textual evidence will be used in an integrated fashion to support and deepen the study where relevant.

The aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of ritual action and performance and the possible resulting experiences of resonance. Moving beyond a Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, the theoretical framework will see ritual action as embodied action. The in-depth analysis of the private religious spaces will seek to reveal the archaeological and material expression of such action and its impact on the everyday lives of private citizens.

The physical remains constitute meaningful means of engagement, and here the concept of materiality is particularly useful, seeing a dynamic relationship involving objects, humans and deities. Corresponding experiences of resonance will work primarily on Rosa's *existential* level of resonance, with the *material* level playing a crucial part as well. This approach allows for an interpretation of embodied experiences in the past through material culture; it also re-directs attention from the minority elite to the broader population and their engagement with and experiences of religion on a daily basis.

References

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