
The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice by Marc J. H. Linssen

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The study of Mesopotamian cultic practice in the Hellenistic period has largely been based upon a dozen or so temple ritual texts which prescribe the preparations and actions to be undertaken as part of the ceremonial process. However, these texts are copies of older original compositions, and therefore may not provide an accurate portrait of Hellenistic ritual practice. To address this potential problem, Marc Linssen has undertaken a detailed comparison of the activities prescribed in the temple ritual texts with information on ritual practice recorded in contemporary documents, in particular the so-called ‘astronomical diaries’ [see Sachs and Hunger 1988–1996]. In this interesting book, he has shown that, despite the changes in Mesopotamian society after the Greek conquest of Babylonia by Alexander the Great, the Babylonian cults continued to play an important and active part of life in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the temple ritual texts apparently reflect actual cultic practice accurately.

In Mesopotamian religion, many gods were represented by an anthropomorphic statue which was not only regarded as an image of the god, but also as an extension of the god’s personality, like a living being. Thus, many rituals involved the preparation of food for this living statue, the ritual clothing of the statue, and the procession of the statue into his temple. Basic rituals were performed every day; other more elaborate rituals were performed in monthly or annual cycles, or on special occasions such as during eclipses or at the rebuilding of a temple.

Many of the rituals performed in Hellenistic Mesopotamia have at least a broad link to astronomy through the use of the lunisolar calendar throughout Babylonia. Perhaps the most important event

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in the cultic calendar was the New Year (*akītu*) festival. In fact, there were two New Year festivals, one held in the first month *Nisannu*, the beginning of the civil year, the other in the seventh month *Tašrītu*, the beginning of the cultic year. In order to prepare for these festivals, foreknowledge of whether an intercalary month is to be inserted would be extremely helpful, as would any advance information on the day of first visibility of the lunar crescent which marked the beginning of the month. This demand of the ritual calendar may have been one of the reasons for the development and continued practice of astronomy within the temple environment. In the Hellenistic period we know, for example, that at least some of the astronomers were employed in the Esagila temple in Babylon and the Reš sanctuary in Uruk [see Rochberg 2000].

The eclipse-of-the-moon festival has a direct astronomical context. Lunar eclipses were traditionally seen as the most significant of celestial omens. In the Neo-Assyrian period, for example, we know of many occurrences of the so-called ‘substitute king (*šar pūḫi*) ritual’, whereby a substitute was placed on the throne during an eclipse which portended the death of the king [see Parpola 1983, xxii–xxxii]. However, during the Hellenistic period, there was no indigenous king to be affected by this ritual. But we do find descriptions of other rituals, involving the playing of kettle-drums, the performance of lamentations, processions, and so forth, from this period. Some parts of the rituals were to be performed at different stages of the eclipse and, as Linssen and David Brown have noted in an earlier paper [Brown and Linssen 1997], there is a direct link between the terminology used to describe eclipses in astronomical texts and the terminology of the ritual texts.

The first half of Linssen’s book contains a detailed description of the evidence for the various rituals attested at Babylon and Uruk in the Hellenistic period. When possible, he compares the rituals as prescribed in temple texts with references to rituals mentioned in the astronomical diaries. By and large he finds good agreement, implying that the ritual texts accurately reflect Hellenistic cultic practice. Of particular interest in this part of the book is a reconstruction of the cultic calendars of Uruk and Babylon [88–91]. It is interesting to note that no specific rituals are attested for the 30th day of the month; whether this is due to a deliberate avoidance of this day because only

about half of the months of the lunar year will have a 30th day, or whether this is an accident of preservation, is not known, however.

The remainder of the book contains new editions and translations of all known ritual texts from the Hellenistic period, including a few new examples identified by the author. Collecting all these texts in one place with consistent English translations makes this book extremely useful. Many of the texts contain colophons identifying the scribes and owners of these tablets. Several interesting conclusions concerning the intellectual activity of the scribes of the Hellenistic period can be made on the basis of this information. For example, many of the scribes are known also to have written or owned astronomical tablets, chronicle texts, and to have appeared as witnesses on legal and business documents. Anu-bēlšunu, son of Nidintu-Anu of the Sîn-lēqe-unnīni family, who owned the ritual tablets TU45 and TU46 (appendix F), is a particularly well known Uruk scribe who owned several astronomical tablets, including the interesting text A3405 which contains a collection of planetary and lunar phenomena calculated using the so-called ACT methods of mathematical astronomy [see Steele 2000], a mathematical text, and an illustrated astrological text [see Pearce and Doty 2000]; and he is one of the few identifiable natives for whom we possess his horoscope [see Beaulieu and Rochberg 1996].

In summary, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of intellectual practice in Hellenistic Babylonia. It is lucidly written, carefully typeset, and an extremely useful resource for future study of this important period and region in both Mesopotamian and Classical history.

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