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Symbolic acrobatics and economic phenomena in early Mesopotamian states: balancing calendars, stars, gods, debts and social structures in the first millennium BCE.

Abstract

The aim of this talk is to reflect on the consequences of fluctuating levels of asymmetrical dependencies on the symbolic productions of the political and religious elites of early Mesopotamian states (Neo-Assyrian, neo-Babylonian period).

Thousands of clay tablets have allowed Assyriologists to examine economic phenomena in Ancient Mesopotamia: the social structures of the economy, the details of agricultural production and animal husbandry, short- and long-distance trade routes, and the dynamics of debts and credits have now been very meticulously studied. The investigation of the field of politics is also well advanced: royal inscriptions, wisdom literature, and official correspondence have facilitated a much improved understanding of both the political philosophy and the morphology of Ancient Mesopotamian political systems. Research into the economic and political aspects of these ancient empires allows us to witness, in the *longue durée*, the continuous forging of asymmetrical dependencies, as well as the tireless efforts of the political elite to stay on top of the game. Religion has also been thoroughly explored, not only by Assyriologists, but by historians of religion, anthropologists, and last but not least by biblical scholars. Primary sources are abundant: astronomical diaries, creation myths, ritual and medical texts, and the associated archaeological and material remains. We can hence trace how social actors of the first millennium BCE imagined how the cosmos worked, and how the political elite utilized divine authority to justify their own grip on power and ultimately to justify the status quo – i.e. the status of continuing inequality.

This takes us to my main point. The relationship between the fields of religion and economy remains understudied. I invite you to explore this track with me by suggesting a new analysis of the New Year rituals organized by the religious and political elite at the time of the spring equinox, which was also the time of the hunger gap and of the severe polarization of social relations. We will observe together the acrobatics of the Mesopotamian political and religious elites, how they balanced calendars and stars and gods; accounts and debts and social structures. In a word: how they dealt discursively and pragmatically with the moral and practical challenges that surface when asymmetry just went too far.

Bio

Caroline Wallis holds a Ph.D. in ethnology from the University Paul Valéry, Montpellier, France (2015) and a degree in visual anthropology from the University of Barcelona (2009). Her doctoral thesis, entitled "National construction and neo-ritualization: an anthropological analysis of the celebration of the Kurdish New Year (Newroz)", investigated the gradual construction by successive generations of Kurdish activists in Turkey of the social representations and practices associated with this political ritual. In 2018, she joined the research center CoE Ancient Near Eastern Empires (University of Helsinki) with the aim of applying anthropological theory to the study of New Year rituals in Ancient Mesopotamia. She suggests a holistic approach attentive to the telescoping of socioeconomic, religious and political aspects (Wallis, in progress). In 2021, Caroline started working within the project "Making Home Abroad" funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation in which she is directing a video documentary on the experiences of Middle Easterners living in Finland, and curating a pop-up exhibition on the rich history of the Middle East. Caroline is a member of the CoE Ancient Near Eastern Empires and is affiliated to the Helsinki Inequality Initiative - INEQ.