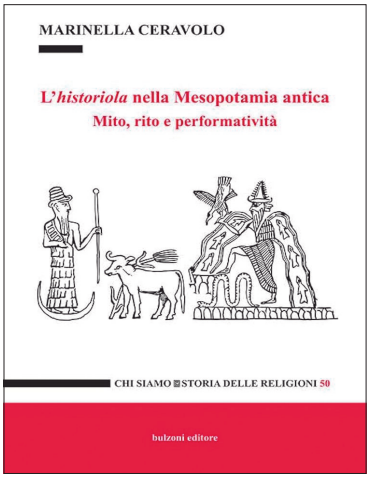
L'*HISTORIOLA* NELLA MESOPOTAMIA ANTICA



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THE BOOK WRITTEN BY MARINELLA CERAVOLO, actually Assistant Professor in History of Religions at Sapienza Università di Roma, is an up-to-date research on a subject, the *historiola*, that has exploded in the last three decades. After the notorious essay by David Frankfurter,[1] many other scholars started to use this concept to refer to the small narratives somehow connected to ritual acts, even though, as far as I know, no one has dedicated an entire monograph to the issue. Coming from her PhD dissertation, this book tries to fill this gap, clarifying various aspects of the concept of *historiola* itself, through a methodological analysis of the history of

1. Frankfurter, 1995.

scholarship, on one side, and of the historical-religious context of Ancient Mesopotamia, on the other. Before moving on, I must confess that I am not an expert in Ancient Near Eastern culture and religion, so I will leave more detailed remarks on linguistic and historic issues to other reviewers and limit my critical remarks to the methodological level. After a short introduction (pp. 23-26), Ceravolo divides the material into three parts: "Genesis and Development of the *historiola*" (pp. 27-118, divided into two chapters); "From General to Particular" (pp. 119-250); "Back to General" (pp. 251-273). As can be understood from the titles of the individual parts, the first analyses the genealogy of the concept, the second tests its hermeneutical strength in the Ancient Mesopotamia context, and the third comes back to more general theoretic considerations. The dissertation is closed with a short conclusion (pp. 275-278) followed by an appendix with transliterated texts translated by Ceravolo herself (pp. 279-300) and an extensive bibliography (pp. 301-342). Unfortunately, there is not an index of names and/or arguments, so in this review I try to give enough page indications to find quicker specific arguments.

The first chapter is opened by Fritz Graf's definition of *historiola* in *Brill's New Pauly*, through which Ceravolo highlights the completely etic dimension of the term and, consequentially, the necessity of a precise definition of the concept itself. It is noticed that the first modern usage, that of Richard Heim's *Incantamenta magica graeca latina*, "is a content without agency" that "certainly influenced the dissemination of '*historiola*' as a term, but less so its resemantisation" (p. 34). So, Ceravolo points out the problem of constructing a scholarship's genealogy of a concept that does not exist as a single term: she decides to investigate the relationship between pragmatic and semantic, or, as she says, "the ritual function of the myth" (p. 36). Here I can only briefly summarise Ceravolo's genealogical survey, in which take the stage scholars such as Bronislaw Malinowski (pp. 43-58) or John L. Austin (with his linguistic acts theory, pp. 62-70 with pp. 70-75 for John R. Searle's reread of illocutory ones), even though some pages are dedicated to the analysis of William Robertson Smith (pp. 37-39), James G. Frazer (pp. 39-41), Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (pp. 41-42); Gerardus van der Leeuw (pp. 42-43), Jane E. Harrison and Samuel H. Hooke (pp. 57-61). In the second part of the 20th century took place "the process of 'canonisation' of the term and its change of status from hapax to a commonly used descriptive category" (pp. 75-76), so much so that some scholars do not feel the need to justify the usage. The last scholar who dealt with the *historiola* without calling it that is Stanley J. Tambiah (pp. 76-80), who anticipated the multidisciplinary method used by Frankfurter in his essay, a very turning point in which, in Ceravolo's words, took place the definitive formulation of the "general theory of the *historiola*" (p. 81). She acutely points out that the definition of the concept passes through the com-

parative method, significantly different from Bronislaw Malinowski's inductive one, that brings us to the twofold dimensions of discourses on *historiolae* (the culturally specific ones) and on the *historiola* (the general level). Being aware of the methodological problem connected with this division, Ceravolo dedicates the last paragraph of her first chapter to the well-known problem of a strong theorization in the study of religion(s) (pp. 83-87). She follows the perspective of Jonathan Z. Smith, the formula of whom adapts in "there is no data for *historiolae*" (pp. 83-87),[2] pointing out that, as for "religion", also "*historiola*" is a purely academic term and so scholars need to define it, that implies also being, as Smith says, "self-conscious" of it.

The second chapter, also belonging to the first part, dwells on the contemporary academic usage of the concept of *historiola*. After analysing different perspectives in scholarship, Ceravolo follows Frankfurter and Daniel J. Waller who have given a strict definition of *historiola* that she summarises as "the narrative manifestations of the myth" (p. 93). Therefore, she analyses the relationship between *historiola* and myth, pointing out that there are two the given solutions: on one side, the *historiola* has been interpreted as a part of a "macro-myth"; on the other side, it has been interpreted as an *ad hoc* construction. Following Frankfurter again, Ceravolo takes a middle path, acknowledging the formative agency of the *historiola* while not denying the somewhat fixed character that binds it to the culture in which the ritual takes place. Important pages are dedicated to the analogical function of the *historiola* that puts in relationship a mythical fact (that happened in the so-called *illud tempus*) with an actual one (in the *hoc tempus*). Ceravolo firstly discusses an important essay by Tzvetan Todorov (pp. 100-102), in which the French-Bulgarian philosopher argued the function of world's re-classification realized through the analogy. Then she moves to Ernesto De Martino: Ceravolo points out the importance of De Martino's reflections on the so-called "de-historification of the negative", through which the crisis of the presence (the existentialist *dasein*) could be coped by human groups (pp. 103-105). Very important is the difference that Ceravolo highlights with respect to Mircea Eliade's conception of mythical repetition (p. 103, n. 31): the latter is a way to redraw the plenitude of the mythical times, while for De Martino is a way through which human beings could operate in the present time. The importance of De Martino's theoretical formulations, joint with his usage of the concept of *historiola*, render inexplicable the absence of this scholar in previous genealogical analyses of the concept of *historiola* (as stated at p. 103, n. 29). Connecting *illud* and *hoc tempus*, Ceravolo come back to the relationship between *historiola* and myth, focusing on the perfor-

2. As known, the original formula is "there is no data for religion": Smith, 1982, p. XI.

mativity of the ritual act and stating that both autonomous myths and *historiolae* rely on the same "mythical source" or "capital", retaking a formulation by Pierre Bourdieu. Before moving to the analysis of the *historiolae* of Ancient Mesopotamia, Ceravolo sums up the critical features of the *historiola*, namely its narrative and analogical features, and its morphological and thematical variations (pp. 115-118).

The third chapter starts with a genealogy of the Ancient Near East studies, in which Ceravolo narrates their philological closure in the 1920s after a too-biblical beginning in the 19th century. The disclosure movement started only in the '80s when many scholars began a methodological exchange with other disciplines such as anthropology or sociology (pp. 121-133).[3] Ceravolo passes to analyse some Mesopotamian *historiolae* from her *corpus*: I cannot enter in details of her analyses that are always insightful and, most of the time, fully convincing. I report only the more general issues that emerge from her study. Ceravolo stresses the importance of the "chain with interrelation" structure, through which the last element of a cosmogony (such as the tooth worm) is chained to the order of creation itself (pp. 136-155). However, she rightly opposes Eliade's idea of a return to the origins, noting that cosmogonies are not always present in the *historiolae*, being necessary only in those related to temple (re)construction rituals. The *historiolae* of this type of ritual allows Ceravolo to deny the folkloristic or subaltern origins of the *historiola* as a religious phenomenon: since kings were also implied in these rituals, she notices that "the alleged 'popular/folkloric' malleability of cosmogonies extrapolated from less solemn contexts […] is thus disproved, and the boundary between 'tradition' and complete 'arbitrariness' proves to be blurred and difficult to mark" (p. 177). Ceravolo refers also the specific cultural context of Ancient Mesopotamia, in which authors of *historiolae* and authors of what we consider authentic myth came from the same scribal class. In this manner, also following a definition already given by Frankfurter, Ceravolo refuses a narrow definition of "myth" as a particular type of narrative, talking rather of a source of narrative.[4] The point is crucial and I will discuss it later, not least because Ceravolo argues it in depth, resorting also to the hermeneutic tools of Bourdieu. Another important issue that Ceravolo points out, is the different forms of de-historification that different *historiolae* used: we have usages of speech acts (in the tooth worm or the *merḫu historiolae*, pp. 203-213 and 214-217), of *similia similibus* procedure (in the Cow of Sîn *historiola*, pp. 217-227) or de-histori-

3. In the study of Mesopotamian *historiolae* this process arrived at the important essay by Sanders, 2001.

4. "Yet myth, properly understood, is not a particular type of narrative but rather a *source* for narrative": Frankfurter, 2017, p. 97 (his italic), quoted by Ceravolo at p. 186.

fication through the narrative setting itself, as in the case of dialogical *historiolae* (pp. 228-243). At the end of the chapter, Ceravolo argues in favour of the effective performativity of the analysed texts, even though she does not believe in a theatrical staging of the dialogical *historiolae*, and, more in general, she correctly highlights the lack of information about the non-verbal components of the rituals.

The last chapter represents the final synthetical moment of the monograph, where are considered all the analyses made earlier and it is tried to assert some methodological features, among them the communication functions of the *historiola* (pp. 258-264) and its peculiar role in the ritual context (pp. 264-269) are fully convincing. I am less convinced that in the *historiola* the relationship between the mythical past – *illud tempus*, of the (hi)story – and modern time – *hoc tempus*, of the ritual – works always as a repletion of the *illud tempus* in the *hoc tempus*. Following other scholars, Ceravolo formulates in these formal terms the relationship (pp. 271-272): *mythical problem: mythical act = ritual problem: ritual act*, and she argues that "the relationship between mythical problem and mythical act is always a positive mythical resolution. Therefore, if everything is done properly, the relationship between ritual problem and ritual act should also yield an equally positive ritual resolution" (p. 272). I think that what Ceravolo describes happens surely in the case of *similia similibus historiolae*, but not in other ones. To make an example: in the texts 1.A (tooth worm) and 2.A and B (*merḫu*, the grain that provokes *hordeolum*), as explicitly noted by Ceravolo (pp. 209-217), there is not mythical act that can be replicated in the present time. She argues that the ritual operator, through his prayer to Ea (1.A) or to Šamaš and Sîn (2.B), or even through the formula *mannam lušpur* ("Who should I send [to come...]?" 2.A, pp. 238-243), misrecognize (a Bourdieu's category) the fact that the mythical act is a replication of the ritual act. I agree with this as long as we do not extend the logic of *similia similibus* to the point of imagining the mythical act that, since it does not appear in the *historiola*, does not take place in the mythical past and therefore has no reason to be imagined by us. It seems to me that these *historiolae* narrate the fixed and always recurrent situations from which the ritual has to start in order to have effect: as we know that the *Sarcoptes scabiei* provokes scabies, they know that the worm decides to locate himself between tooth and gum when Ea ordinated the world or that the *merḫu* (the grain) ends in the eye of the young man when Šamaš and Sîn did their agricultural activities. So to say, the difference between scientific and mythical descriptions takes place in the semantic sphere (one quantitative and the other qualitative), not in the common idea of a fixed reality that can occur and, consequentially, have fixed procedures to cope with. Thus the absence of a mythical act is the very way in which these *historiolae* represent this fixed reality, because if Ea's mythical act against the worm had taken place, there would be no tooth worm

or *merḫu*. Since the tale of text 1.A ends with the tooth worm that explicitly goes against the proposes of Ea, I think that the worm himself can fit in the old-fashioned category of "trickster", i.e. the mythical character that shaped the world's negative components, (mis)recognizing the healing process made by the *āšipu* aided by Ea as a form of cosmos reaffirmation. In brief, one could say that this type of *historiola* works as an open paradigm of truth that allows the ritual operator to make things.

This last statement is connected with the other Ceravolo's methodological point that did not fully convince me: she takes from Frankfurter the idea that myth is a "source for narrative", and I genuinely confess that I do not understand what it means. I agree with the idea that every narrative can potentially be a myth, if a group of people believe that the content of the narrative is true and just; I strongly disagree with the idea that myth exists outside of a narrative, i.e. outside of language. This could lead to a rather metaphysical perspective, and Ceravolo is well aware of this, trying to resolve the point by conflating Frankfurter's concept of "source of narrative" with Bourdieu's "mythical capital". The latter seems to be understood by Ceravolo as both the sum of all the myths of a religion and the unequal compartmentalisation of this knowledge into authoritative institutions and/or individuals. Discussing the relationship between *historiola* and "real" myth (pp. 254-257), she correctly points out the modality of construction of a *historiola* that, through formal and rhetorical mechanisms, "sounds and, consequentially, becomes a 'real' myth" (p. 256). Correctly again, Ceravolo says that "the performativity of the *historiola* can thus be thought of as the resultant of two distinct symbolic forces, one intrinsic and one extrinsic" (p. 257), namely the narrative itself and the authority of the ritual operator. The latter is emphasized through a couple of quotations of the critics of John L. Austin's theory of linguistic acts by Bourdieu (pp. 256-257), who says that "the power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson" and that "authority comes to language from outside".[5] Now, even though this discourse is taking us a bit far from the *historiolae*, I think that following Bourdieu on this line could lead us to a *cul-de-*

5. "*Le pouvoir des paroles n'est autre chose que le* pouvoir délégué *du porte-parole, et ses paroles – c'est-à-dire, indissociablement, la matière de son discours et sa manière de parler – sont tout au plus un témoignage et un témoignage parmi d'autres de la* garantie de délégation *dont il est investi. Tel est le principe de l'erreur dont l'expression la plus accomplie est fournie par Austin (ou Habermas après lui) lorsqu'il croit découvrir dans le discours même, c'est-à-dire dans la substance proprement linguistique – si l'on permet l'expression – de la parole, le principe de l'efficacité de la parole. Essayer de comprendre linguistiquement le pouvoir des manifestations linguistiques, chercher dans le langage le principe de la logique et de l'efficacité du langage d'institution, c'est oublier que l'autorité advient au langage du dehors, comme le rappelle concrètement le* skeptron *que l'on tend, chez Homère, à l'orateur qui va prendre la parole*": Bourdieu, 1982, p. 105 (his italics).

sac. Immediately after the text already quoted, Bourdieu says that "at most, language represents, manifests and symbolises this authority"[6] and similar things he says in a text of the same years when he describes the symbolic power trying to keep the bar between the Scylla of an idealism detached from the material structure and the Charybdis of a brutal Marxism that flattens "ideological products" over class interests.[7] His solution of the "double determination" of the "ideological products" presents to the scholar of religion a problem that it appeared to be already solved, namely what rends "religious" the "religious competencies" of the specialist. If this specialist is "religious" because of his/her pertaining to a group of specialists who agree among themselves to be "religious specialists" and thus are (mis)recognised by the group(s) to which they belong, I am pretty confident that the issue becomes what does it mean "religion", *i.e*. a word. Consequentially, if we want to follow Bourdieu's idea of sym-

6. "*Cette autorité, le langage tout au plus la* représente*, il la manifeste, il la symbolise : il y a une rhétorique caractéristique de tous les discours d'institution, c'est-à-dire de la parole officielle du porte-parole autorisé s'exprimant en situation solennelle, avec une autorité qui a les mêmes limites que la délégation de l'institution; les caractéristiques stylistiques du langage des prêtres et des professeurs et, plus généralement, de toutes les institutions, comme la routinisation, la stéréotypisation et la neutralisation, découlent de la position qu'occupent dans un champ de concurrence ces dépositaires d'une autorité déléguée. Il ne suffit pas de dire, comme on le fait parfois, pour échapper aux difficultés inhérentes à une approche purement interne du langage, que l'usage que fait du langage, dans une situation déterminée, un locuteur déterminé, avec son style, sa rhétorique et toute sa personne socialement marquée, accroche aux mots des 'connotations' attachées à un contexte particulier, introduisant dans le discours le surplus de signifié qui lui confère sa 'force illocutionnaire'. En fait, l'usage du langage, c'est-à-dire aussi bien la manière que la matière du discours, dépend de la position sociale du locuteur qui commande l'accès qu'il peut avoir à la langue de l'institution, à la parole officielle, orthodoxe, légitime. C'est l'accès aux instruments légitimes d'expression, donc la participation à l'autorité de l'institution, qui fait toute la différence – irréductible au discours même – entre la simple imposture des* masqueraders *qui déguisent l'affirmation performative en affirmation descriptive ou constative et l'imposture autorisée de ceux qui font la même chose avec l'autorisation et l'autorité d'une institution. Le porte-parole est un imposteur pourvu du* skeptron": Bourdieu, 1982, pp. 105-107 (his italics).

7. "*Les idéologies doivent leur structure et leurs fonctions les plus spécifiques aux conditions sociales de leur production et de leur circulation, c'est-à-dire aux fonctions qu'elles remplissent premièrement pour les spécialistes en concurrence pour le monopole de la compétence considérée (religieuse, artistique, etc.), et secondairement et par surcroît pour les non-spécialistes. Rappeler que les idéologies sont toujours* doublement déterminées*, qu'elles doivent leurs caractéristiques les plus spécifiques non seulement aux intérêts des classes ou des fractions de classe qu'elles expriment (fonction de sociodicée), mais aussi aux intérêts spécifiques de ceux qui les produisent et à la logique spécifique du champ de production (communément transfigurée en idéologie de la 'création' et du 'créateur'), c'est se donner le moyen d'échapper à la réduction brutale des produits idéologiques aux intérêts des classes qu'ils servent (effet de 'court-circuit' fréquent dans la critique 'marxiste') sans succomber à l'illusion idéaliste consistant à traiter les productions idéologiques comme des totalités autosuffisantes et auto-engendrées justiciables d'une analyse pure et purement interne (sémiologie)*": Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 409-410.

bolic systems as "structured and structuring structures",[8] we must be aware that language is the first and fundamental tool that has the (re)structuring function through its intrinsic metalinguistic possibility that allows speakers to speak about language itself before speaking about society. Thus, the fact that "language represents, manifests and symbolises this authority", as Bourdieu puts it, is sufficient for that someone in some time, manner, and place to represent authority more truthfully and more justly than the given authoritarian representation.

That is not the right place to do a deep critique of Bourdieu's thought, *opus magnum* that far exceeds my possibility. If I venture in this brief critique is only because the depth of Ceravolo's analysis forces me to follow her both on the ancient texts (fortunately in translation with the transliterated cuneiform text) and on bibliographical paths. I hope that readers do not misunderstand the critical point of view of this review: I can criticize this monograph, perhaps wrongly, because there are a great number of new insights as well as new discussions of old problems that have been analysed through the patient and profound read of the secondary bibliography of both Ancient Near East and religious studies. This is a fresh book that every scholar who works on magic, ritual-myth relation, and, obviously, *historiola*, must have, even if Ancient Mesopotamia is not his/her field of interest. I cannot speak for the historians and philologists of the Ancient Near East, although I believe that the high level of methodological reflection will at least certainly help a reflection on the categories of the discipline. Furthermore, as I try to show in this review, this book touches on many different and more general theoretical issues that could interest also a more generalist scholar of religion.

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8. Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 405-407, quoted by Ceravolo at p. 256, n. 1.

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