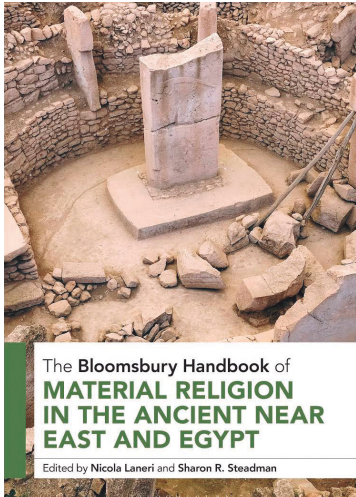


MATERIAL RELIGION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND EGYPT



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THE VOLUME CONSISTS OF AN *INTRODUCTION* AND SIX PARTS, including 29 contributions by scholars who address the main theme from various angles, with different methods and approaches. Focusing on the overall theme “(...) how archaeological correlates of religious practices and beliefs can be connected”, the specific aim is to provide a method for reconstructing what is termed the materialization of religious beliefs, considered to be the quintessence of any form of ancient or modern religiosity (p. 1). Consequently, the articles “(...) investigate the fundamental importance of a material approach to studying ancient forms of religiosity enacted by ancient Near Eastern communities from prehistoric periods until Late Antique times” (*ibid.*).

It is impossible here to give a detailed account of such a varied panorama of topics and competences. Therefore, I will offer a few unsystematic comments on some

essays within the limits of my expertise in historical-religious methodology, particularly for ancient Near Eastern cultures, apologizing to those authors whose contributions will simply be mentioned.

Part I, “*Material Religion*”, consists of David Morgan’s essay only (“*Chance and Lived Religion. The Material Culture of Transforming Randomness into Purpose*”), a stimulating and insightful methodological introduction to all that follows. From the very beginning of the history of humankind, trying to combat or manage chance, variability and randomness has been the fundamental challenge to survive, in the constant search for hidden meanings or messages to decrypt in natural phenomena and historical events. Among the countless practices devised, which Morgan divides into “destructive”, that tend to eliminate or reduce randomness, and “constructive”, aiming to retrieve information from it – the Author dwells on the latter, and in particular on divination. This is the dimension of *Lived Religion*, where the materiality of problems and anxieties are addressed practically, in the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of everyday life. Of course, there is a continuous dialectic between the “theoretical”/“intellectual” and “practical” planes, since every type of practice stems from, or presupposes, a theory, of which it is the application. And application and results, in turn, cannot but influence the theoretical basis of such ritual operations. Clearly, it is not the object of study that changes, but the approach to it through a different interpretive path that privileges, in the first instance, the materiality of ritual (which, let it be said *en passant*, does not always fit easily into our concept of “religious”, not to be used always as an all-encompassing general category). Morgan himself implicitly confirms this when emphasising the multiformity and plurality of this dimension: “Lived religion is driven by the need to deal with randomness or chance, and to do so by invoking a *variety of powers* (*italics mine*) in practices that range across a wide variety of descriptors such as supernatural, magical, occult, theurgic, and miraculous” (p. 11).

Part II is dedicated to “*The Human Body*”, and the complex symbolism it can convey: it is a veritable “laboratory” of ideas and ritual strategies, raw material for witnessing and highlighting beliefs of all kinds.

In this perspective, actual uses made of the body of the living through a whole series of signs and modifications, as well as the various treatments reserved for the bodies of the dead in 3rd millennium Mesopotamia (the case study is the necropolis of Başur Höyük) are investigated by Brenna H. Hassett (“*Material Religion and the Body in the Ancient Near East*”), looking for cases in which it is possible to grasp the materialization of religious belief in the human body, *i.e.* activities that leave traces in bones and teeth, and the final deposition of human remains; in other words, where belief intersects with the biological individual, and how we can trace belief in the

bodies of the past. The body as a locale for adornment and the special powers of jewellery in creating a religious discourse beyond the aesthetic level in ancient Near Eastern cultures form the focus of Zuzanna Wynnanska's contribution (*"Jewelry as a Powerful Tool in the Religious Discourse between Humans and the Supernatural in the Ancient Near East"*). A topic of the greatest interest is the one addressed by Melissa S. Cradic (*"Body Politic. Body-Objects and Necropolitics Past and Present"*): the "archaeo-political" problem of treating the bodies of the deceased found in excavations equally, regardless of their true or presumed ethnicity, in the specific case of contemporary Israel: Canaanite and "Palestinian" bodies treated as cultural artefacts and biological specimens on the basis of their historical, scientific value, and not as potential ancestors. In this regard, one cannot help but take up his appeal for considering all human remains as one universal category, irrespective of origin or identity. Statues as materializations and various manifestations of divine presences in Mesopotamia (Davide Nadali and Lorenzo Verderame, *"Behind the Cultic Statue. The Materiality of Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia"*), or as potential bestowals of healing in Egypt (Michael S. Chen, *"Meanings and Practices in the Design of Objects. What Does Design Reveal about Experiences?"*), and the extraordinary uses of figurines in Hittite magic rituals (Billie Jean Collins, *"The Brief but Spectacular Lives of Figurines in Hittite Ritual"*) complement this section.

Nothing, perhaps, better represents "materiality" in the human/supernatural relationship in a more spectacular way than cultic buildings, as exemplified in Part III, *"The Architecture"*.

Two very different cases – *mutatis mutandis* – show how temple architecture develops and becomes progressively more complex, along with the growth of the state, as a sign and demonstration of growing identity and power: in the kingdoms of Mari (Pascal Butterlin, *"Religious Life, Urban Fabric, and Regeneration Processes at Mari during the Second Half of the Third Millennium BCE"*), and of Urartu (Mehmet Işikli, *"Evidence for an Urartian Belief System. The Institutionalization of Religion in the Mountainous Eastern Anatolian Highland – the Case of Ayanis"*). A special cultural atmosphere is recorded in "border" temples located between Egypt and the Levant, such as Tell el Dab'a, seat of syncretistic processes that creates a rather well-blended amalgam of Egyptian and Levantine architecture and rituals (Danielle Candelora, *"Sacred Space and Immigrant Identity in the Middle Bronze Age. The Case of Tell el Dab'a"*). *Costly Signaling Theory* (or CST: the exhibition of reproductive fitness by animals for potential mates, when a signal decreases the safety of the signaller, but increases benefits for the community and in the long run also for the signaller itself) is applied to the case of the archaeological structures in South Anatolia, and specifically in Göbekli Tepe, to investigate the relationships between architecture (visible

signs) and ritual behaviour and belief (Sharon R. Steadman, “*The Price of Devotion. Costly Signals in Neolithic and Chalcolithic Architecture on the Anatolian Plateau*”). The author’s idea is that signals change over time but they transmit the same indicators: the target audience moves from the multi-communal focus of the monumental and spectacular public architecture of the Neolithic (“earthly realm”) to the supernatural domain of the Chalcolithic, where the Watchers “(...) could easily receive signalled message in the small, private and personally costly acts of piety” (p. 166). In the pre-pottery Neolithic, ritual behaviour moves from more public and visible arenas to activities within the home (domestic). In this case, the activity of maintenance and renovation becomes costly. All this would testify to a transition from a community-wide identity to one based more within individual households. Temple architecture in the Levantine area, both in the North (Stefania Mazzoni, “*Building Temples in the Northern Levant*”) and in the South (Ido Koch, “*Sacred Architecture in Iron II Southern Levant*”), provides the topic for the two closing essays. Mazzoni discusses the origin of the “temple *in antis*” that developed in the northern Levant, in the 3rd millennium, providing a model for the region over the next three millennia: her methodological considerations on the limitations imposed by the absence of texts to understand the relationships between the material nature of archaeological evidence, and the investigation of “immaterial processes” such as rites, cults and beliefs, are of major importance. For his part, Koch emphasises how, in Iron Age II (*ca.* 950-750 BCE), there is a regional variety in cultic methods and strategies, while at the same time affirming the power and action of the regional leader and highlighting the mediating role of sacred architecture.

The written medium, even beyond the specific text it bears, or in symbiosis with it, is investigated in the articles in Part IV: “*The Written Words*”.

Mesopotamian scribes, for example, copy and recopy ancient Ur III texts that acquire growing authority and respect through their pure materiality, beyond the message they convey (Jennifer C. Ross, “*Scribes in the Temple. Materializing Missing Monuments in Mesopotamia*”). Searching for “hints of religiosity” in the early Iranian material is the difficult (and almost desperate) task undertaken by Jacob L. Dahl (“*The Heraldry of Early Iranian Religion*”). Turning to the Hittite context (Gregory McMahon, “*The Materials of Hittite Magic and Religion*”), it is truly amazing how the practitioners make use of virtually any object in their rituals. In this, as elsewhere in the volume, one must note how problematic is the opposing use of terms/concepts such as “magic” and “religion” as antithetical: in fact, SISKUR and EZEN₄ are complementary, and not opposing conceptual categories, as correctly emphasized by McMahon, talking about “the inextricable link between what we would consider politics and religion” (p. 225). Apart from its content, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* has an

unmistakable materiality of its own, a physicality interacting with the authority of the text, as demonstrated by Christina Geisen (*“Experiencing the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead. A Funerary Text Corpus as a Material Object”*). Inscribing spells on Aramaic incantation bowls turns them into powerful “magical” agents (Marco Moriggi, *“Pottery and Magic. A Glimpse into Late-Antique Mesopotamian Religious Tradition and Its Materiality”*). In biblical tradition, the P[riestly] corpus is an example of a text that introduces a special aspect into the material nature of contemporary ancient Near Eastern cultic practices, namely ritual silence, along the lines of the extraordinary power attributed to the word and to speech (Seth Sanders, *“The Biblical Priestly Tradition as Material Religion. A Comparative Ancient Mediterranean Approach”*). The parallel with other records of a ritual character must take into account the differences between corpora, their function, and the polytheistic context – as in the case of Ugarit – in which they are used. These are important historical distinctions that, it goes without saying, should not give rise to value judgements.

That animals always have a role as absolute protagonists in the symbolic imagery of humankind throughout its history, is even superfluous to point out. Going beyond the sterile level of phenomenological ascertainments, it is interesting to investigate historically which values and functions are attributed to them in the various epochs and societies, and so touching fully on the theme of material religion theorised by Morgan in his introductory article (Part V, *“The Animals”*).

At the sacrificial and/or festive level, for example, species, sex, age and the anatomical parts of animals are from time to time vehicles of specific meanings and particular beliefs (Jwana Chahoud and Emmanuelle Vila, *“Man, Animal, and Gods. Animal Remains as Indicators of Beliefs in the Ancient Near East”*), from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic onwards (Nerissa Russell, *“Resting on Strong Shoulders. The Power of Animal Scapulae in the Near Eastern Neolithic”*; Max Price and Jacqueline Meier, *“Animals and Ideology in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Southern Levant”*). Certainly, animals contribute powerfully to variously materializing different ideologies, but this is trivial, because what is relevant are the differences found in various societies: that the “talus” is chosen as a medium loaded with symbolism does not tell us much, if we do not delve into where, why, and how it varies over time, and so on.

In terms of method, I would propose to rather use for those ancient societies the term pre-polytheistic, leaving aside the obsolete “Animism” and “Totemism”. The theriomorphic aspects of Hittite deities are well exemplified in Stefano De Martino’s contribution (*“The Theriomorphic Images of the Hittite Gods”*). In the Late Antique period, not animals directly, but hunting served as symbolic visual source for sharing a language of ritual power and domination over nature that continued to be narrated unto the Late Antique periods, from the Sasanian period to Late Roman times and up

to the Ostrogothic period (Marica Cassis, Sydney Burton and Sanaz Safari, “*Sharing Animals. Animal Imagery as Late Antique Intercultural Dialogue*”).

Landscape, territory and natural contexts in general are reworked and experienced in a culturally manageable dimension by the human communities living in them. This takes place in the most varied forms, as shown by the contributions in Part VI, “*The Landscape*”. Here we range from ancient Mesopotamia (Anna Perdibon, “*Material Religion and the Perception of the Sacred Landscape in Ancient Mesopotamia*”) to the ancestral landscape marked by the Kurgans of the Kura-Araxes (Chiara Pappalardo and Nicola Laneri, “*Imagining the Supernatural. The Landscape of Kura-Araxes Sacred Funerary Mounds*”), and to the theme of the desert (Egypt and the Negev: Laurel Darcy Hackley, “*Cultic Aspects of the Egyptian Desert*”, and Steven A. Rosen, “*Deconstructing the Shrine. An Essay in Understanding Desert Cult*”, respectively). While natural elements are not infrequently personified with various attributes and active functions of great social relevance (think *e.g.* of ordeal rituals involving watercourses, or the identification of mountains with supernatural beings, though not on a level of trivial deification, as old theories claimed), even the hostile and deadly deserts can present positive cultural values, albeit within the framework of a characteristic ambivalence. On the one hand, a mire of potential dangers, a chthonian and chaotic environment par excellence, and on the other, a pure place, a refuge and seat of specific deities and cult places, unified in a dialectic between inhabited and uninhabited that mitigates its threatening negativity (one has merely to think of the significance of the desert in biblical tradition!).

Where the prevailing context of life is the sea, an element with values in some ways not too dissimilar from the desert, human beings elaborate very specific strategies of appropriation, behaviour and worship, as Aaron Brody shows for Phoenician sailors (“*Maritime Viewsapes and the Material Religion of Levantine Seafarers*”). The space of the ship is raised to the role of a sacred place, in which particular deities interact with their worshippers according to specific ritual traditions: among the latter, there was certainly Melqart (a god of expansion and travel, but not of pestilence, as far as I know) and the polyvalent Astarte; and also a “Poseidon” (*interpretatio graeca*, perhaps the marine characterisation of a poliadic Baal, as for example in Arwad). Less evident is this role for the ancient mother goddess Asherah, never mentioned directly in Phoenician sources, hypothetically perhaps only in the 2nd millennium, and also for Tanit (preferably: Tinnit), since the sign that is usually connected to her seems more a symbolic vector of a generic divine sacredness than a symbol connected to that goddess.

Although not all on the same level in terms of method and novelty of theme, the contributions in this volume are generally of great interest and confirm the undeni-

able usefulness of an approach that privileges documentary materiality in research on ancient Near Eastern religions. The volume as a whole is a stimulating contribution and we should be grateful to those who conceived and produced it.

A *caveat* seems appropriate, however, which concerns specifically the use of the term “religion”, both in itself and in the singular form of the noun. We all know more or less what we mean by that term, but equally we should be aware that we cannot apply it *tout court* to societies other than our own (even Latin *religio* does not coincide with our modern concept!). These are societies that did not distinguish between religious and other spheres of culture in the way we do. Instead of a codified and detectable “religion”, they possessed complex traditions shaped by their own conceptual categories and a cosmological vision, in which what we see as religious, political, economic, etc. spheres were organised differently. Moreover, if our approach is difficult when written texts are available, the situation is even worse when they are not. We need to be aware of this, but sometimes the temptation (even unconscious) to reify a “Religion” that belongs only to our own culture risks diverting us and causing us to regress in methodology. It is pointless to extrapolate a religion from a context that does not possess it, either in name or in fact. This does not mean that we should paralyse ourselves, but rather, choose less risky strategies and speak, for example, of “cult” and “ritual”, far more innocent terms; and, above all, always aim to identify emic conceptual and practical realities, although this will never be fully realisable.