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Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Divine and Interaction with Divinity in the Ancient Near East

The Modern Assyriological investigation into the nature of divinity in the ancient Near East has been a complicated one as, until recently, it has been heavily impacted by preconceptions arising from an evolutionary approach towards religion. As I have addressed that aspect in some of my own former research in recent articles, I refrain from revisiting it in this context.[1] The point from which I want to start my present commentary in this collection of articles is my former proposition to understand the conceptualization of the divine in the ancient world view as that of a cosmic order in which mortals and divinities cooperate to maintain that order. I thus posited that in its interaction with the human sphere, divinity was conceived as a mentalizing agent.[2] Drawing on the New Animism in anthropology, however, more recent Assyriological scholarship has reintroduced the notion of an animated universe in which everything was regarded as a "god" with whom humanity could establish a relational bond.[3] My aim here is to counter such a universalizing claim by providing a more nuanced picture and telling the story of the ancient conceptualization of the divine with the help of early archaeological and written evidence from the ancient Near East. In my view, awareness of these data is essential to tackling the notion of the categorization and the invocation of, and interaction with divinity in the ancient Near East.

By the time of the earliest known textual records holding information on how the ancients conceptualized divinity, people had been living in the Ancient Near East for millennia. Rich archaeological data reveal how they followed their sources of subsistence in the foothills of the Anatolian mountains according to season, while burials and caves attest to the care that they bestowed upon the dead.[4] Funerary practices go far back in human history; the oldest known burials date between 200,000 and 40,000 BCE,[5] with the Shanidar cave in Northern Iraq from 50,000 BCE, being one of them.[6] Around 10,000 BCE, i.e., six thousand or more years before the invention of writing, massive monumental T-shaped pillars carved with images of scorpions, vultures, snakes, wild boars, and other animals set in circles suggest the creation of sacred pla-

1 Pongratz-Leisten 2022 and 2023.

2 Pongratz-Leisten 2011 and 2022. On the concept of mentalization rather than anthropomorphism see Gervais 2013; Pyyisiäinen 2001 and 2009.

3 See Perdibon 2019, who founds her research on the definition of divinity in Nevling Porter 2009.

4 Cauvin 2000.

5 Lichter 2007, 247.

6 Charvat 2002.

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ces in Göbekli Tepe, close to modern Urfa in southern Anatolia.[7] These circles are believed to have served as sacred spaces in which people gathered for cultic ceremonies to honor their ancestors and other otherworldly beings. The development of a cult of ancestors during society's transition from hunting-gathering to an agrarian lifestyle implies that people, even if still mobile, returned to a particular place at a given time of year to engage in ceremonies honoring the dead. As time went on, the dead gained legal significance for the living, who buried their relatives beneath the floors of houses to stake their property rights and identify their family structure. Only much later did this function of ancestors come to be attested in textual sources.[8]

The practice of venerating ancestors was widespread in the ancient Near East. The richly decorated bodies in the cemeteries of the Natufian villages in the hills of the Mediterranean coast date to approximately 12,500 BCE and attest to the cultic care with which their people treated their dead.[9] The burial practices of the Late Natufian people in Jericho seem to have called for the separate reburial of the skulls of adults. As there are far fewer plastered and decorated heads than the number of people living in the villages of Jericho, Tell Aswad, and elsewhere at the time, this practice and the later plastering of such skulls with inlaid cowrie-shell eyes indicate the performance of an ancestor cult that acknowledged social hierarchy. We can thus safely assume that "adaptive behavior," as revealed in technical developments such as the harvesting of cereals included a "socially transmitted knowledge"[10] that manifested itself in the commemoration of the dead. Thanks to their "sedentary settlement, these larger communities also put down roots in a stable, permanent social environment, where the company of the dead, of which we see witness in the first cemeteries that are mingled with the houses of the living, reinforces metaphorically the community of the living and can legitimate in some way its permanence."[11] In addition to the monuments and burials related to the ancestor cult mentioned above, the finds at Çatal Höyük (7400–6000 BCE), a large settlement of over two hundred houses, some of which contained boukrania mounted on walls and hearth enclosures, and reliefs of panthers and a female figure believed to be in the process of giving birth, as well as sculptures that include the *Lady of the Animals*, attest to elaborate symbolic expressions that clearly included divine agents. Such a sharp focus on sacralized sites, temples, carved stele, skull cults, and symbolic wild animals along with the distinction in the sizes of houses and their architecture in the late Epipaleolithic and Neolithic have been explained in relation to social differentiation.[12] In the historic era, the self-definition of the individual as rooted in their bond with ancestors is revealed in idio-

7 Bachenheimer 2014.
8 van der Toorn 1996, 42–65.
9 Mithen 2006, 32ff.
10 Cauvin 2000, 19; Sperber/Hirschfeld 2004; Tomasello 2000.
11 Cauvin 2000, 20.
12 Hodder 2014, 13.

matic phrases such as "to walk the path of one's forefathers," as attested in the eighth-century BCE burial inscription of Queen Jabâ in Nimrud, Assyria,[13] which must have been Syrian in origin as similar phrases exist in Aramaic[14] and Hebrew. What is more, aside from contributing to horizontal and vertical relationships,[15] which eventually extended beyond the lived-in world,[16] this relationship with ancestors determined communal behavior in its dealings with space as a created, lived-in, and structured environment.[17] While the burial of the dead is a ritual performance that is primarily a means of "disposing" of a dead body and thus includes many rituals of purification, secondary burial and the performance of a mortuary cult commemorating the dead have regenerative, cognitive, and emotional aspects that establish authority in space. Due to the permanence of such commemorative space, tradition and history become visible and shape the collective identity of the group or community in question.

Thus contrary to what many books on the history of religion would make us believe, the origins of religion were not based exclusively on the apprehension and fear of natural forces, as expressed in their personification.[18] Neither were they a top-down development with shamans susceptible to supernatural agents mediating between the human and the spirit world.[19] Nor can we explain them in evolutionary terms, progressing from immanence to transcendence as promoted recently by Marshall Sahlins, who takes Karl Jasper's notion of the Axial Age as a paradigm for his approach to religion.[20] When defining the origin of religion, we must also add the dimension of relational bonding within intraspecific groups as expressed in ancestor worship,[21] since social bonding with ancestors marked the first step in building a concatenated network with the world beyond. The extensive archaeological evidence of the care paid to the dead reveals that when it came to the self-definition of the individual in the ancient Near East beyond the human network of family, kin, and community, ancestors offered a social network of protection that extended into the divine realm. This is supported by insights gleaned from current models of culture in the cognitive sciences as developed by Atran and others,[22] who view culture as the result of concatenated individual interactions at the level of individual decisions that led to

13 Fadhil 1990, 464, l. 4 . . . *urḫu abbēšu tallik* "and she went the path of her fathers."
14 "My father laid down and went to [. . .]" in Kottsieper 2001, 176–179; Lemaire 1998. For Hebrew examples, see Krüger 2009.
15 Harcourt/de Waal 1992.
16 Guthrie 1993.
17 Gehlen 1998, with extensive bibliography.
18 Jacobsen 1976, who nonetheless acknowledges the focus on the ancestor cult in the early period.
19 Lewis-Williams/Pearce 2005.
20 Sahlins 2022.
21 King 2007.
22 Atran *et al.* 2005, 749.

macrostructural norms from the bottom up rather than as a set of ideas and beliefs imposed from above.

Beyond playing a protective role, divine agents in polytheistic systems function as carriers of identity either for individuals or groups and as intermediaries in a chain of divine command. They define not only the self, but also membership in a family as well as in larger social entities such as the tribe or city state. In the historical era, these various layers of identities are reflected in personal sentence names such as "My-God-Is-My-Father" (*Abī-ilī*), "My-City-Is-Good" (*Ālī-ṭāb*), "The-God-Is-The-City" (*Ālum-īlum*), "Ishtar-Is-My-Mother" (*Eštar-ummī*), and "Shamash-Is-The-Clan" (*Šamaš-Illat*).

In this concatenated network, ancestor spirits, protective spirits (^{d}LAMMA), the personal god (*ilu*) and goddess (*ishtar*), as well as the god of the family[23] operate as the primary divine agents that establish membership in the social unit of the household. Once the individual finds him/herself in a larger network of an urban environment, this protective network that defines the identity of a person falls under the aegis of the patron deity of the city to which the household belongs. Within this concatenated social and divine network, it is the ancestor spirits that provide the historical dimension of identity, while the family gods and, on a greater scale, the city god represent the local spatial dimension of identity. In antiquity, these two social frameworks operated as primary relational constructs and defined the membership-identity of the individual. As society grew more complex, so too did the identities of the individuals within it, who now bonded with a host of divine agents to build a supportive network similar to that of their other social networks within the larger community. Thus, the divine agents that established the role-identities of individuals and larger social units also helped structure behavior during social interactions,[24] as exemplified primarily in mythological narratives as well as in a passage in *The Righteous Sufferer* (*Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*), which refers to all the protective forces that have abandoned the protagonist due to the wrath of Marduk, chief god of the pantheon:

> From the day my Lord punished me,
> And the warrior Marduk became furious with me,
> My own god forsook me and went up his mountain,
> My goddess left and departed elsewhere,
> My protective spirit (*šēdu*) of benevolence split away from my side,
> My guardian spirit (*lamassu*) took fright and sought someone else.
> "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom", Tablet I.41–44[25]

The notion of the person as a socially embedded entity rather than an individual in the western modern sense is crucial to our interpretation of what religion does and how divinity was perceived in the ancient Near East.

23 On the family god, see van der Toorn 1996, 66–93; Charpin 1990; Veenhof 2018.

24 Cast 2003, 41–53; Bell/Hansen 2008.

25 For the latest edition, see Oshima 2014.

In the 5th and 4th millennium BCE, monumental temple structures built on terraces and thus visible from a distance from the alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia developed into economic households and signifiers for the community engaged with their provisioning. A diversified assemblage of archaeological remains indicates that urban communities identified with the temple and its patron divinity and that this was central to the way in which they shaped their identity. Below I list the early evidence from the city of Uruk in Southern Mesopotamia:

(1) Sealings on bullae containing tokens meant to keep track of commodity transactions display images of everyday agricultural and pastoral activities, fishing, and weaving, on the one hand, and ritual scenes with a bearded man wearing a headband and net robe, on the other. (2) This figure, which modern scholarship has termed the "priest-king," occurs repeatedly in the company of the goddess Inanna, who is represented in the form of her symbol, the reed bundle, which developed into the logographic sign used to write her name in the fourth millennium. (3) Beyond his presence on glyptic remains, the priest-king also appears in the uppermost register of the famous *Uruk Vase,* where, representing the community, he offers the abundant output of the fields and pasture to the goddess. (4) This same figure, however, is also shown confronting wild lions, as in the *Hunting Stela,* or facing captives bound in all sorts of distorted positions, as in sealings. The last of these attests to a leader at the top of a social hierarchy who enjoys control over life and death. (5) Some of the sealings attested during the transition from Uruk III to the Early Dynastic I Period (*ca.* 2900–2800 BCE) display logographic writings of the city names that combine a pictograph for pedestal with the symbol of the patron divinity of the respective city including AB(èš)-utu (sanctuary of (the sun god) Utu/Shamash) for the city of Larsa, AB(èš)-ùri (sanctuary of (the moon god) Nanna) for Ur and AB(èš)-mùš (sanctuary of (the goddess) Ishtar) for Zabalam. The names of the cities in these seals included Kesh, Larsa, Uruk, Nippur, Zabalam, Ku'ara/Urum (?), Kutha (?), Eridu, Adab, and UB (?), i.e. important urban and cultic centers in early Southern Mesopotamia.[26] Such logographic writing again attests to the importance of the patron deity and his or her temple as a carrier of identity. Because the sealings were found on jars and receipts in their respective cities, these *City Seals*[27] have been studied primarily from an economic perspective under the assumption that they speak to their economic ties with Uruk.[28] What matters in our investigation is that the temples

26 Sallaberger 2010, 33 assumes AB as "place" in a more general sense because in UD.GAL.NUN orthography AB/UNUG corresponds to *ki* or "place." His claim that because the office of the sanga, generally regarded as an administrator of the temple, is also associated with the é-gal in Lagash, AB should be interpreted as a profane institution, is not convincing because the administrative complex of the queen in Lagash is dedicated to the goddess Bau, so the modern distinction between sacred and profane cannot be applied to an ancient context. Wang 2011 assumes that the early writing for Nippur is EN.KID in the Archaic City Seals designating a toponym /nibru/ which was read /ellil/ only later.

27 Matthews 1993; Steinkeller 2002; Wang 2011.

28 See most recently Selz 2020.

in these cities as represented by the patron divinities' names on the seals also served as major economic households, thereby pointing to an understanding of divinity as a major landowner in the urban sphere as well as the foremost protective force.

The advent of writing in the second half of the fourth millennium BCE saw administrative texts referring to offerings made to Inanna-evening-star, Inanna-morning-star, and Inanna-prince,[29] thereby revealing the astral manifestations of Inanna aside from her conceptualization in anthropomorphic terms. Such written evidence is complemented by the imagery of a seal in the former Erlenmeyer Collection that likewise dates to the late fourth millennium BCE. On it, the archaic symbols for the rising and setting sun in combination with a star and a drum may be read as the "Festival for the Rising and Setting Venus."[30]

To conclude, in Uruk, the archaeological and written evidence from the fourth millennium BCE attests to a complex conceptualization of divinity, which was imagined as a mentalized agent that could be imagined anthropomorphically and represented in astral terms, by a symbol or an emblematic animal.

It is another five hundred years before we get the earliest evidence of the practice of categorizing and systematizing divinities in god lists. So far, such god lists have been discovered in the cities of Fara and Abu Salabikh to the north of Uruk,[31] not in Uruk itself. The god list from Fara in its reconstructed form with ten columns on each side of the tablet contained around 560 divine names. A good many of these names – over 40% – include the sign NIN, which stands for either "lord" or "lady" when combined with a particular profession or activity, such as "Lady-Birth-Brick," "Lady Scepter," "Lord of the Granary," etc. These Early Dynastic god lists begin with those we know as the leading divinities from later god lists and mythology including the heaven god An, followed by Enlil, later chief god of the Sumero-Babylonian pantheon, the goddess Inanna, Enki, god of the fresh water ocean, the moon god Nanna, the sun god Utu, the Divine Crown, and the goddess Nisaba, patron deity of writing. The rest of the god names can be grouped as follows: (1) divine/deified emblems and paraphernalia, such as "the (deified) Crown is a Protective Goddess" etc.; (2) deified professions or offices, such as "A (Divine) Seaman," "The Brick-Maker of the Temple," "The Prince Gudu-Priest," etc.; and (3) cultural achievements or properties such as "The Incense," "The Brazier," "The Kettle," etc.[32] These last categories pertain to the contemporary economic and administrative spheres in the urban life of the Sumerian city states. Since an entire section on divinities responsible for particular tasks in the temple district of Eanna in Uruk is included in the list, some scholars have suggested that such lists must have existed in Archaic Uruk as well, though none have been found so far. The deification of the multiple entities involved in the operation of the temple as

29 Sarzyńska 1993.
30 Woods 2011.
31 Krebernik 1986.
32 Selz 2008.

household with its massive bureaucracy and extremely diversified body of labor reveals an awareness of and appreciation for the cultural achievements of urban civilization. The act of deifying these entities turns the divine world into an integrated system of action (*Handlungssystem*) that keeps urban life and the cosmos running – one that cannot be explained by the notion of a universal animism of the cosmos. In the textualization process, these god lists belong alongside other lexicographic series, such as the profession list, the various lists of woods, metals, stones, etc., and are thus a product of the scholarly mind reflecting on cultural experience. With the growth of city states into territorial states, scholars began systematizing the ever-expanding pantheon according to other principles, such as genealogy and kinship, and the model of court retinue on a local, regional, and supra-regional level. Thus, entities such as deified offices, cultural achievements, etc. disappeared to a large degree. However, treaties concluded in Northern Mesopotamia and Northern Syria including the Syro-Hittite realm of control might include deified natural phenomena such as mountains, the land, rivers, heaven and earth beside members of the panthea of the treaty parties.[33]

I have dwelled here on very early architecture, monuments, and iconography because by the time of the earliest known writing and the god lists, the people of Greater Mesopotamia had been living in complex urban spaces – first in the north, then also in the south – for at least a thousand years. By the Late Uruk period, i.e., the end of the fourth millennium BCE, Uruk had a population of 40,000, a hierarchical structure, delegated responsibilities, and a diversified labor force. Such social experience led to a conceptualization of the divine world in which relational constructs with the divine were based largely on social frameworks and political organization rather than on individual choice. Religion thus operated as a resource in the construction of the self as an embedded entity.

Archaeological evidence reveals that the complex and sophisticated polytheistic world that we encounter much later in textual sources is the result of a long adaptive and cumulative cognitive process of cultural transmission and modification. The conceptualization of the divine world through religious expression presents itself as the outcome of social and cultural learning.[34]

33 See the treaty between Till-Abnu of Apum and Assur (Kitchen/Lawrence 2012, no. 24), and the treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Huqqana of Hayasa (Beckman 2012, no. 3) and several more in this volume. Such entities, in addition to the city, the city wall the mortar, and the brick, even though not deified will range among the divinities supposed bless the king, the city of Assur and the land of Assyria in the Takultu Ritual (Parpola 2017, nos. 38 and 40). Moreover, they might appear in incantations of purification rituals, however, again not deified, see Perdibon 2019, chapter 2, for instance.

34 Cultural learning includes "imitative learning, instructed learning and collaborative learning" based primarily on reconstruction; Tomasello 2000. See, however, recent approaches that show that memory and communication "involve reconstruction rather than copying of the material remembered or communicated" (Sperber/Hirschfeld, 2004).

As time went on, the god lists retained the notion of primordial gods but largely ceased deifying offices and professions, and instead began favoring a polytheistic pantheon structured as an *Integrated System of Action (Handlungssystem)*, which – according to models of conflict and cooperation – presupposes that the gods act coherently.[35] Such an integrated system of action entails multiple dimensions, including cosmography, local and regional cults, and myth, all of which are again structured according to entourage, i.e., the hierarchical notion of a royal court, genealogy, and familial relations, with both powerful and less important divinities.[36] The gods were organized hierarchically and were differentiated according to their roles and functions on the local as well as regional and supra-regional levels.[37] Within this integrated system of action, each member of the pantheon contributed to the maintenance of the cosmic order, just as in human society, functions and roles are differentiated for the sake of the survival of the whole. This notion is conveyed in the Sumerian myth of *Enki and the World Order*,[38] in which Enki assigns particular functions to specific divinities. In addition, this semantic dimension of the pantheon – which grants specific functions to certain types of deities – initially allowed for the equation of Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian divinities in the later god lists as well as the cross-cultural translation of deities in the international context of antiquity.[39] The translation of deities occurred particularly in political texts, such as international treaties and letters, and grew from a theological discourse on the categories and typologies of deities that arose with the Club of Powers during the Late Bronze Age in the ancient Near East.

Divine functions, roles, and status came with particular material signifiers or appurtenances – Akkadian *simtu* – which were appropriate and necessary for conveying the particular position of a person or a divinity within the social network or pantheon. The notion of *simtu* as characterizing the appearance (*šiknu*) of the divinity and conveying his or her particular role within the pantheon is addressed in Nabû-apla-iddina's *Sun God Tablet*,[40] whose text discusses the need for the king to know the original image and appearance of the sun god as conceived in times of yore. In other words, the ancients distinguished between a divine "archetypal" image and its materialization in the cultic image or other representations. Any appurtenances, signifiers, and cultic paraphernalia could be assigned divine status and even result in cultic ven-

35 I adopt this approach from my former teacher Burkard Gladigow 1983; see also Gladigow 1990, Gladigow 1997, and Gladigow 1998.

36 Krebernik 2002.

37 Gladigow 1979; Uehlinger 2008. For the variety of panthea in a particular culture, see Sallaberger 2004, who adduces the concept of the "ethnic pantheon", the cultic and mythic pantheon, and the pantheon of the individual.

38 Black *et al.* 1998–2006; see also Galter 1983 and Espak 2015. Jerrold S. Cooper is preparing a new edition of the myth.

39 On the notion of the translation of divinities, see Wilson 1950, 249; Assmann 1996; Smith 2008; Pongratz-Leisten 2011.

40 Woods 2004.

eration such as the provision of offerings. However, as I have argued elsewhere, such assignment of divine status to paraphernalia generally did not result in the same scope of agency characterizing the divinity itself.[41]

It is here where I would like to return to the notion of an animated universe. It seems to me that while some cosmic and natural phenomena could be controlled by certain divinities, as the heavens were by the god Anu, storm and thunder by the storm god, and the moon and sun by Nanna/Sîn and Utu/Shamash, many divinities, such as those associated with various types of vegetation or fire, or river and mountain gods, were immobilized, that is, bound to their particular natural phenomenon and thus restricted in terms of the scope of their agency. In other words, though such phenomena reflect the notion of an animated universe, human-divine interaction and relational bonding was selective and varied immensely according to the status or role of a particular divine counterpart.

The conceptualization of specific types of divinities with particular scopes of functions and roles[42] did more than enable the intra- and cross-cultural translation of divinities; any human interaction with divinity required an adequate knowledge of ritual and ritual conduct for communication to be successful. As such communication was always context-bound and situational, the divinity had to be properly addressed if the interaction were to be successful. Beyond the actual name of the divinity, a proper address required the use of suitable by-names, epithets, and titles. All of these combined ensured the divinity's attention. They also framed the interaction in a way that specified the divinity's scope of agency in that particular context. In this way, the name and epithets shielded the worshipper against misinterpretation and unintended side effects. They set limits on the divinity's principal mobility and freedom of action in certain local and functional respects.[43] Prayer literature from Assyria and Babylonia reveals that whatever the localized situation of the address to a divinity may have been, the invocation was informed by local cultic as well as supra-regional mythological and theological traditions, thus reflecting the need for expertise and knowledge in any successful interaction with a divinity. In other words, knowledge of the theological discourse on the gods as conveyed in god lists and myth deeply informed any successful interaction with the gods.

In this context, I would like to stress the importance of distinguishing between god names and epithets, as other have suggested by using the situational context as the framing device for the assignment of names, and speaking of "Augenblicksgötter" in the context of performance, i.e., religion in the making.[44] Assuming the ancient Near Eastern perspective, I suggest that while a divinity can be addressed by his or

41 Pongratz-Leisten in press.

42 On the notion of the type rather than individual personhood in the ancient conceptualization of the person, see Kippenberg 1990, 115–116.

43 Pongratz-Leisten in press, 630.

44 Bonnet/Galoppin 2021.

her particular name, but also by the names of other divinities, the purpose of such an invocation would lie in aggrandizing the scope of divine agency at a particular moment by amassing the functions associated with these other divinities. Ultimately, however, the worshipper would always relate to the particular divinity by its primary name. The other names would define the particular scope of agency at a particular moment in time and would thus function similarly to epithets.

My intention in this short contribution has been to provide a more nuanced approach to the interaction between the human and the divine and to correct the adoption of the anthropological approach to the origin of religion in the ancient Near East, which emphasizes an animistic world view. Rather than provide clues on early expressions of spirituality, on the basis of the archaeological evidence and ancient god lists I have suggested taking the status of the individual as embedded in the social network of the family household and the city as the point of departure and focusing on the conceptualization of the relational constructs between the individual and the divine, including the concatenated network that extended from deified ancestors through the protective genius, personal god, family god, patron divinity of the city, and members of the regional and supraregional panthea to the chief god of the pantheon.

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