

65th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale “Gods, Kings and Capitals in the Ancient Near East”, Paris, 8-12 July 2019

Workshop “Assyriology and Anthropology”

Chairs: Lorenzo Verderame (lorenzo.verderame@uniroma1.it) & Emanuel Pfoh (emanuelpfoh@gmail.com)

Since its very beginnings in the 19th century, Assyriology as a scientific discipline has been essentially based in archaeological fieldwork and philological/linguistic study. The choosing of these two methods of historical enquiry is not by chance, as they both developed hand in hand with the very constitution of Assyriology as a discipline. The archaeological exploration of the Middle East—the very landscape of ancient civilizations—and the discovery of thousands of texts—mostly in the shape of tablets and monumental inscriptions—gave shape to a disciplinary need of focusing primarily on material culture and languages. The decipherment of ancient inscriptions provided by default some sociological speculations regarding the structure of ancient Near Eastern societies as well as its functioning. However, such speculations were essentially text-based and devoid of the technical and methodological apparatuses of sociology and social anthropology as these disciplines developed in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It is only in the 1960s that new insights from social and cultural anthropology started to be incorporated into Assyriological interpretations of Near Eastern societies—notably by the “School of Rome”, of M. Liverani, C. Zaccagnini, F.M. Fales and others.

This workshop aims, in broad terms, at evaluating the relationship between Assyriology and social anthropology, namely what can the latter contribute to the first, since the seminal contributions of the 1960s. It also seeks to analyze punctual examples of such a disciplinary and methodological interaction as well as to open new avenues of historical enquiry and rethink Assyriological themes and issues under a socio-anthropological perspective.

The workshop is limited to invitation and, apart from the two chairs, the following scholars shall take part in it: Agnès García-Ventura (Universitat de Barcelona), Gioele Zisa (Università di Palermo), Marinella Ceravolo (Università degli Studi di Roma), and Luciana Urbano (National University of Rosario). Each participant shall have 20 minutes for delivering the paper and 10 minutes for comments and questions from the chairs and public.

The order of exposition with the abstracts follow:

-Introduction: Lorenzo Verderame & Emanuel Pfoh

-Emanuel Pfoh (CONICET / National University of La Plata), “*Social Anthropology in Assyriology: Historiographical, Epistemological and Methodological Considerations*”.

The disciplines of Assyriology and Social Anthropology has not been good conversation partners. If one may synthesize the communication between the two, one could say that Assyriologists have made use of some ethnographic insights in the pre-1960 period as a means of adding some dynamics to social reconstructions based on textual interpretations. Since the 1960s, more sound uses of social anthropology have appeared in Assyriology, notably by studies of the “School of Rome” (M. Liverani, C. Zaccagnini, F.M. Fales). In its

turn, Social Anthropology has traditionally looked at Assyriology for some historical examples of social evolution frameworks and stages (the rise of social complexity, the state, class society, etc.), but in a rather superficial fashion, without a true interdisciplinary drive. This paper, besides offering some general insights on the historical relations of Assyriology and Social Anthropology, presents some guiding perspectives on methodological and epistemological aspects from anthropology that may be of use for Assyriological interpretation.

-Marinella Ceravolo (Università degli Studi di Roma), “*The Chicken and the Egg Debate: Facing Myth and Ritual Theory in Assyriology*”.

Anthropology and the history of religions have long attempted to define clearly and precisely the relationship between myth and ritual. As a result, this research has generated schools of thought that are often diametrically opposed and distant. Conversely, Assyriology, which for a long time neglected theoretical and interpretative issues, today has to deal with these matters without the support of a well-defined methodological framework.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how much anthropology and the history of religions can contribute to the construction of an interpretative layout for the understanding of myth and ritual in Mesopotamia. The main focus will concern the contact between these two elements, wondering how anthropology, the history of religions and speech act theory can be adapted to the vast mythological and ritual material in our possession. To do so, this paper will use *historiola* as a link between pragmatic and semantic features in ritual. In favor of a multidisciplinary approach, but opposed to an *ipso-facto* use of methodological positions that do not take into account the historical, cultural and linguistic specificities of each single culture, the Austin’s motif of “how to do things with words” will be replaced by the difficult question: “how were things done with words in Mesopotamia?”.

-Lorenzo Verderame (Università degli Studi di Roma), “*Dialoguing with Anthropology: The Sumerian Kinship System*”.

The relation between anthropology and historical sciences has been a complicated one, so much so when it comes to dealing with a culture so distant in time and even space as that of ancient Mesopotamia.

In this contribution I deal with one of the thematic pillars of anthropology, namely kinship and its terminology, and its applicability to ancient Mesopotamia. The way cultures express kinship relationships may be grouped in a fixed series of systems. Different kinship systems may respond to equally diverse ways of social organization or, at least, to ideal constructions of relational links between the individual and other members of society, particularly in connection to descent and marriage.

Thus, considering both the “classic” kinship system theory and its critics, I analyse the terminology of kin relations in Sumerian language. I discuss how the Sumerian kinship terminology fits in the anthropological kinship system and, in order to highlight the methodological entanglement between anthropology and historical philology, I linger on the problem of the hermeneutic of ancient (textual) sources and its relationship with model-based analysis for ancient complex/literate societies, such as third millennium Mesopotamia happens to be.

-Agnès García-Ventura (Universitat de Barcelona), “«*La valence différentielle des sexes*» in *Assyriological Research or From Nature to Nurture*”.

The French anthropologist Françoise Héritier published in 1996 one of her most widespread and discussed monographs titled *Masculin/féminin: la pensée de la différence* where she defended that a certain “valence différentielle des sexes” was quite universally attested and built upon cultural constructions rather than biological essences. In other words, for Héritier the issue to explore was not difference but inequality, based on nurture rather than nature, to put it in traditional terms.

In this communication I take Héritier’s proposal to reflect on the way some aspects of this “valence différentielle des sexes” have been faced in Assyriological research. I will take as examples some features of two main topics of study: the emesal (still quite often referred to as the Sumerian “women’s language”) and the sexual division of work. In doing so I aim to reflect on the preconceptions underlying some of the proposals and on the usefulness of Héritier’s proposal to better understand some issues, moving from the often unconscious “separate spheres” based on “nature” which underlie some previous Assyriological research to the explicit “differential valence” based on “nurture”.

~~-Giule Zisa (Università degli Studi di Palermo), “*Towards an Anthropology and an Ethnopsychiatry of the Mesopotamian Body: The Case Study of Therapies for the Loss of Sexual Desire*”.~~

In recent years numerous editions of cuneiform medical texts as well as monographs on specific topics have appeared, increasing considerably our knowledge on ancient Mesopotamian medicine. The draw of interdisciplinary dialogue and the need for theoretical tools has led some Assyriologists to turn to the anthropological disciplines. In this paper I will focus in particular on the therapies for the loss of male sexual desire. Šà-zi.ga indicates a group of Standard-Babylonian incantations, rituals and medical prescriptions, from the Mesopotamia of II-I millennium, whose aim is to make man get the lost sexual desire. The expression, in Sumerian šà-zi.ga, in Akkadian *nīš libbi*, literally means the “raising of the *libbu*”. The word *libbu* indicates heart and innards, but also the place of feelings and thoughts. *Libbu* embodies at the same time the organic dimension of the body and the emotional and psychological one of the person. Through a critical reading of the works of Ethnopsychiatry and Medical Anthropology, I will answer the following questions: who is the patient who must be cured? What role does the female partner have in the healing process? What function do the images of sexually excited animals play in the incantations? What is the relationship between spells and medical prescriptions? And how do they work for the purposes of the therapeutic efficacy? Which *way of reasoning* is at the basis of the therapeutic itinerary?

-Luciana Urbano (National University of Rosario), “*The complex structures of alliance. Clothing as a symbol of the political-matrimonial bond. Mari (Tell Hariri, Syria- 1775-1762 B.C.)*”.

The aim of this paper will be to address a group of social practices that show the relationship between costume and constitution of social bonds, particularly political and marriage ones, through the analysis of the Mari Letters (1775-1762 BC; Tell Hariri, Syria) from the Old

Babylonian period (c. 2000 – 1500 BC). Clothes can be thought of as the first habitat, the first space, the second skin. Wearing a garment is an act of significance and socialization. I am interested in the inquiry of a series of social practices found in the sources of Mari: “to tie/untie oneself to the costume of” found in the rituals of constitution/dissolution of political and marriage alliances. Besides, bearing in mind that the State is nourished by kin relationships and incorporates them into its political, social, economic and ideological dynamics, I will also analyse the *lipit napištim* ritual, which clearly shows how political agreements present symbols related to lifelong and blood bonds. Thus the realization of a political alliance adopts practices and discourses typical of kinship relations, including marriage.

The title of this presentation is a clear allusion to the emblematic work by Levi-Strauss “The Elementary Structures of Kinship” ([1949] 1993), a milestone within anthropology. That book functions here as background, counterpoint and springboard to deepen in complex cultural features that are not restricted to the structures shaped by marriage prohibition and circulation of women. Also, and as in a specular and deferred dialogue, we recover the inputs by Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato, who in her work “The elementary structures of violence” ([2003] 2010) reflects on the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the symbolic world.

In order to interpret this complex system of signs, I recover Clifford Geertz’s (1973) contributions regarding a dense description of culture, as well as the lines of thought developed by anthropology of costume and gender studies, especially since Judith Butler’s inputs. I consider costume as a “symbolically dense object” (Weiner: 1994) with a complex significance, a singular angle to rethink political and marriage bonds making reference to body, power and gender relations.

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Omar N'SHEA (University of Malta)

The sovereign and the beast: human and animal entanglements in the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934–612 BC).

Power, politics, and identities emerge *in* relations. Anthropologists continue to this day to critique the discourse of human (usually male) as a stand-in for all of personkind by cross-cutting this construct with investigations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In the recent ‘animal turn’, however, anthropologists have extended the site of their investigations to study relations that are constituted through multi-species. Human-animal entanglements and relatedness have allowed researchers to further the feminist critique of the ties between kinship and biology, and the current state of knowledge destabilises the anthropocentric discourse that has plagued most of the writings even beyond the discipline of anthropology proper (Descola, 2013). But can these frameworks be fruitfully used by Assyriologists?

Ancient Mesopotamian archaeological remains in general, and Neo-Assyrian sources in particular, reveal that multi-species relations were central to the discourse of power and politics and their involvement with the construction of gender. In this paper, I would like to shift attention from the (often asymmetrical) human relations frequently discussed in studies of imperial ideology, to the human-animal entanglements for the construction of imperial masculinities. I aim to show that one of the elements for the proper (that is, *legitimate*) exercise of rule was precisely the refusal to abstract the figure of the sovereign not only from its relatedness to other life forms. The central logic of the paper will address the question of whether the anthropological ‘animal turn’ might provide a means through which we could make sense of the human-animal entanglement in the Neo-Assyrian royal textual and visual culture. I propose to analyse the royal epithets, the hunting texts, the palatial reliefs, and the royal glyptic in order to tease out the contradictory logic that emerges from this multi-species relatedness as it cross-cuts with the search for a sovereign identity in imperial discourse. At the same time, and in order to redress the balance, I also seek to address the emic ontology of animality.

Descola, P. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press.

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Ann K. GUINAN (Penn Museum)

Omenology and Anthropology

This presentation will approach Mesopotamian divination and the anthropology of divination from complementary directions. Africanists have access to divination as a living system. Their work can help fill in the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions inherent in the ancient sources. On the other hand, Mesopotamian omen compendia provide investigators with systematic patterns of divinatory meaning. Anthropologists, by in large, avoid the study of omens. Further, ethnographic field notes may contain records of individual divinatory predictions, but full analysis of the patterns behind them is often insufficient. I will argue that using both types of material in tandem produces a fuller picture of divinatory inquiry and, in the end, greatly enhances our understanding of Mesopotamian divination.