

BETWEEN THE MOUTH OF THE TWO RIVERS The Agency of Water, Springs, Rivers and Trees in ancient Mesopotamian Cosmology and Religion

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This contribution offers an anthropological view of holy waters, springs, sacred rivers, and trees in the ancient Mesopotamian religious framework. Water is omnipresent in Mesopotamian myths and rituals, particularly in association with the cosmic Apsû, the primeval source of all waters. The pristine waters flow out through springs in the mountains and form the flowing bodies of rivers. For the Babylonians and Assyrians, rivers and watercourses were sacred and cosmic entities, often worshipped as deities. The Tigris and the Euphrates particularly appeared as river deities, with life-giving, motherly, healing, and judging roles. This essay considers the interrelationships between the Apsû, springs and sacred rivers, and the associated sacred trees, mountains and anthropomorphic deities, to shed new light onto ancient Mesopotamian notions about nature, religion, and the cosmos.

Keywords: religion, cosmology, mythical and therapeutic landscape, non-human agency, water, rivers, springs

Introduction

Rivers, canals, springs, marshes, and underground waters were prominent topographic and natural elements that informed and shaped the Mesopotamian alluvial plain, roughly corresponding to modern Iraq. The Tigris and the Euphrates were the principal watercourses of the Mesopotamian landscape, together with a myriad of tributaries, canals, irrigation channels, and the maze of the Southern marshes. The present article will examine some entangled conceptions, beliefs, and practices involving water, springs, and watercourses in the ancient Mesopotamian religion, as attested in the literary and religious sources from the 2nd and 1st millenniums BCE written in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages.¹ By exploring the roles ascribed to water, this essay will shed new light on the connections between nature and religion, myth and ritual, on the agency of the non-humans in cosmology and the religious and therapeutic landscape, as well as on the materiality and fluidity of the ancient Near Eastern polytheisms. Water, springs, and rivers played major roles in the reli-

¹ Sumerian and Akkadian were the languages spoken by the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians, civilizations flourishing in the Near East during the 3rd through 1st millenniums BCE. These languages were written in cuneiform (edge-like) signs on clay tablets.

gious life of the ancients and were intimately connected to the other inhabitants of their cosmos, such as sacred trees, mountains, and anthropomorphic deities.

The ancient cuneiform sources will be read through the theoretical lens of the anthropology and history of religion. In particular, I utilize the notions of "other-than-human" personhood and of "pervasively relational cosmos" promoted by scholars engaging with new animism (Hallowell 1960; Harvey 2006; Harvey 2013a; Harvey 2013b; Descola 2005; Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Kohn 2013). According to this understanding of personhood, non-human beings (including natural elements, places, and environments) possess personhood, agency, and social characteristics. This is particularly evident in the mythical and ritual contexts, where non-human beings demonstrate intentionality, agency, and communication within the broader web of life. Consequently, nature and landscapes should be understood as a "heterarchy of relational beings" (Harvey 2013; Ray 2019) in which a myriad of visible and invisible "other-than-human" inhabitants dwell, relate, and act. Any landscape is thus a mythical, sacred, and cosmic locus, dense with narratives, spiritualities, and memories (Schama 1995).

The agency of water and its entanglements with the Apsû

Water played a dominant role in the ancient Near Eastern religious life with its polyvalent symbolism: it was considered not only the source of life, abundance, divine radiance, purification, and salvation, but also that of death, disease, and punishment. References to water and its agency were copious in the myths, rituals, and incantations of the cuneiform world where the complex relationship between water, springs, rivers, and the Apsû was a predominant and widespread feature.

The pristine water of rivers was imagined as pouring forth from the Apsû. The Apsû was a fascinating and complex entity of the Mesopotamian cosmology and religion. It was conceived to be both a primeval deity and a place: in the 1st-millennium Babylonian creation myth, the *Enūma Eliš*, the Apsû was the ancestral male deity, embodying the sweet water of the underground, which, together with Tiamat, his female salt-water counterpart, gave birth to the world. According to this tradition, the whole world came into being from the mingling of fresh and salt water, expressing eloquently the belief in water as the source of life. Later in the narrative, the Apsû was slaughtered by Tiamat, and his watery body became a cosmic subterranean region (*Enūma Eliš* I 1-6; Lambert 2013: 50-51). This watery abode, as the place of pristine purity, was appointed as the dwelling place of the god Enki/Ea and his wife Damkina. Presiding over the subterranean and sweet waters, Enki/Ea was the god of wisdom and healing crafts in the ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian pantheons.

The connection between the Apsû and the god Ea recurs throughout the religious literature. For instance, in the Old Babylonian *Flood Story*, Atrahasis praised Ea

while standing on the banks of a river with the intention of reaching the god in his abode through prayer and dreams (Lambert/Millard 1999: 76–79; Hecker 2015: 142; Ermidoro 2017: 96–97 and 146–148). The exchange of messages between him and the god is possible thanks to the god’s messengers, called *Laḫmu-of-the-Apsû* (lit. the “Hairies-of-the-Apsû”). Along with Ea’s messengers, whose representations remain unknown, other inhabitants of the Apsû include the *Apkallus* or “Sages.” The *Apkallus* were monstrous creatures, hybrids between humans and fish, often depicted with wings and other birdlike features. These semi-divine beings were strictly connected with wisdom, healing, and protection. However, they were not described as fully benign in the incantations, but rather as ambiguous and cunning entities (Abusch 2002: 210; Feldt 2015).² Common figures in the reliefs of the Neo Assyrian palaces, they were often portrayed in the ritual gesture of sprinkling pure water on a stylized tree (generally referred to as the Tree of Life). Moreover, protective figurines with domestic purposes were fashioned in their shape (Feldt 2015; Wiggermann 1992). It comes as no surprise that the name Apsû also refers to an architectural feature of the temples, suggesting the existence of a pond, pool or holy well within the sanctuaries, filled with fresh waters and inhabited by fish.

In the realm of incantations, on multiple occasions one finds water, the Apsû, and the rivers invoked alongside divine, arboreal, urban, and templar entities. An incantation for purifying the body of a sick person dated to the 1st millennium BCE offers a holistic portrayal of the interconnections between the human and non-human inhabitants of the cosmos:

Lordly waters, flowing straight from the great mountains,
 Waters, flowing straight from the pure Euphrates,
 Born out of the Apsû, granting the lordship,
 Born in Eridu, you have touched the ... ,
 You have touched the cedar, you have [touched] the *ḫašurru*-tree,
 You have touched Anu in the heaven, you have touched the divine Earth on
 the earth,
 You have touched Enki, the king of the Apsû, the pure one,
 You have touched the body of this man, son of his god,
 You have made him pure, you have made him clean,
 May the evil tongue [stand] aside! (*Šurpu* IX 119–128 trans. Reiner 1958: 49)

The pure waters, pouring from the high mountains, purified and healed everything with their flowing touch, producing a powerful series of interconnections between natural elements, deities, and the human body. Furthermore, the mention of the cedar and the *ḫašurru*-tree indicates that the purity of the flowing waters from the mountains was connected with the eastern horizon, where these cosmic evergreen trees grew and where the Mountain of Sunrise housed the sources of the rivers (Woods 2009).

² Incantations pertained to the ritualistic repertoire: in the cuneiform world, as in many other ancient and modern cultures, any ritual performance was comprised by gestures that employed different ingredients (i.e., minerals, plants, objects, animals) and by spells.

Springs, rivers, and mountains

Some traditions held that a cosmic Mountain of Sunrise housed the sources of the rivers. In the Sumerian tradition, the sources of the rivers were located in the "mountain of the spring" (*kur idim*). This mountain, the Dukug or "holy mound," was the remote mythical place where the subterranean water emerged from the ground and gave birth to the cosmic, life-generating rivers. A reference to the "distant sources of the *Ḫalḫalla*" is found in a Sumerian hymn to Utu (Kramer 1985: 122). This evidence suggests the connection between the river *Ḫalḫalla* (lit. the "Rolling-River"), the Sun, and the East. In both Sumerian and Akkadian traditions, Mt. *Ḫašur* (an unknown mountain on the eastern horizon) was considered the place where the Tigris and the Euphrates had their origin. This mountain was often envisioned as the cosmic Mountain of Sunrise. The waters flowing from the cosmic Mountain of Sunrise were imbued with miraculous healing properties as well as the ability to determine destiny.

A cosmic and legendary source of all rivers was the spring *pī nārāti* ("Mouth-of-the-Rivers") of the literary accounts. Its name evoked the opening of the earth with its outpouring of pristine water from the darkness, coming directly from the *Apsū*. In the Sumerian tradition, the *pī nārāti* was conceived as the source of the legendary cosmic rivers, and was traditionally localized in the eastern mountainous lands or even in *Tilmun* (a mysterious land identified with modern Bahrain).³ Tablet XI of the *Gilgameš Epic* reports that the wise *Utnapišti* was living in a distant land at the "Mouth-of-the Rivers" beyond the cosmic ocean of the Waters-of-Death (*mê mūti*) (Gilg. XI 205–206; George 2003: 716–717). Though this passage locates the *pī nārāti* in a remote land belonging to the cosmic realm, any further reference to its location is lacking. As *Gilgameš* is traditionally said to wander in the western horizon in the Akkadian account, the location of the *pī nārāti* can be envisioned as being in the far west, beyond Mt. *Māšu* and the ocean.

This source gave birth not only to cosmic and divine rivers, but also to specific physical rivers, such as the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the *Ḫalḫalla*. The latter was a legendary river flowing in the Eastern mountain ranges that was assimilated over the course of time into the Tigris, and which was generally referred to as "the mother of the mountains." Moreover, some mythical narratives specify the number of the cosmic rivers flowing out of the *pī nārāti*. In the Sumerian *Lugalbanda and the Anzû-bird*, the cosmic tree (the abode of the Thunderbird) is said to stand on a cosmic mountain from which it sinks its roots deep "in the midst of Utu's River of the Seven Mouths" (Wilcke 1969). According to this context, the reference to Utu affirms the

³ *Tilmun*, deep in the south-east of the Persian Gulf and identified with modern Bahrain, was a land between legend and reality in the eyes of the Mesopotamians. Due to the profusion of water sources and its eastern location, *Tilmun* was identified with the cosmic *pī nārāti* according to some Sumerian traditions. This understanding is supported by the later classical and Arabic sources, which refer to it as the place where the Tigris and the Euphrates re-emerged in the deep South-East after sinking into the marshes (Horowitz 1998: 104–105; George 2003: 864; Woods 2009: 202–203).

location of this river in the mythical Mountain of Sunrise. In the *Incantation of Eridu* it is recorded that there were two mouths of two rivers (see below). Noticeably, in addition to the common terms for springs (Sum. *idim*, Akk. *nagbu* and *kuppu*), the literary sources use the terms “mouth” and “eye” (Sum. *igi*, Akk. *inum*) as synonyms for the source of a river (Blaschke 2018: 234–239).⁴ This image recalls the creation of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates from the eyes of Tiamat as reported in the *Enūma Eliš* (see below).

Cultic life of springs

Springs were also cultic places in which shrines were built, and rites performed. Evidence for this is found in the *Song of Bazi*, which refers to the establishment of a sanctuary for the minor herder god Bazi among the springs of mounts Šaššar and Bašār (modern Jebel Bishri). According to this literary text, Bazi’s dwelling was in a cavity among the rocks of the mountain: its slopes are described as reaching deep into the earth and high into the sky, its walls were made of precious stones, and its gates were protected by dragons and dead gods. Such a reference underlines the association of mountains as thresholds of the netherworld with the liminal and chthonic characterization of the god’s abode. Bazi’s temple is located in an aquatic setting, where the underground waters emerging from the Apsū merged into the divine River, Id, and engaged with Ea. The specific reference that half the waters are death and half the waters are life, as well as the mentioning of the gods Šamaš (the Sun), Šakkan (herder god, son of Šamaš) and Id (the divine River), serve as allusions to the judging and purifying agencies of water and the legal practice of the River Ordeal (George 2009; see below).⁵

In the description of Bazi’s sanctuary, this text introduces the dialectic between mountains and temples. As sacred places, mountains were the natural mirror of the urban temple (Horowitz 1998). Indeed, temples were built to resemble mountains: the shape of the ziggurats clearly manifested this intention with its constitutive architectural parts, which were built and named according to the natural and mythical topography of a mountain. Each temple had a sacred water source (i.e., a fountain, pool or well) that was symbolic of the Apsū. Even the temple names expressed this correspondence: many temples carried names such as “great mountain” or “temple of the mountain.” Conversely, mountains corresponded to temples in the wilderness, beyond the boundaries of civilization. This written evidence might be a hint of a real presence of temples or shrines in the mountainous context, and likewise of

⁴ Similar conceptualizations are found in other cultures past and present. A famous case is comprised by Sulis Minerva, the famous Iron Age thermal spring at Bath, England (Ray 2014: 41–42). See also the spring sources of Indian sacred rivers, which are referred to as mouths (e.g., Gangotri, “Mouth-of-Ganges” and Yamunotri, “Mouth-of-Yamuna”) (Haberman 2011: 44–47).

⁵ An ancient judicial practice in which the accused was thrown into a river for determining his/her guilt or innocence.

seasonal festivals and/or processions held *in loco*. Indeed, Mt. Šaššar (Jebel Bishri) has been noted for its springs since antiquity, some of which still provide water and deep wells.⁶

One of the few well documented examples of a spring cult in Mesopotamia is offered by the so-called Source of the Tigris, or Tigris Tunnel, which has been a cultic place visited by locals, travelers, conquerors and political actors since antiquity.⁷ In the first part of the 1st millennium BCE, the Source of the Tigris was at the heart of the Hurrian kingdom of Šubria, a conflicting neighbor of the Assyrian empire (Radner 2012: 1–4). As pointed out by Harmanşah, in this liminal and contested territory, the Assyrian kings “performed sacrificial rituals, held sumptuous feasts, received tribute and gifts from the submissive local rulers, and had their craftsmen carve commemorative inscriptions and ‘images of kingship’ on the bedrock at the mouth of multiple caves” (Harmanşah 2015: 130). These ritual events are attested in the royal image inscribed on the rocky wall of the cave *in situ*, as well as in the iconographic representations inscribed on the bronze registers of the Balawat Gate (the imperial city gate adorned with decorated bronze bands illustrating the king’s chronicles). In the relief Band X of the Balawat Gate narrating Shalmaneser’s campaign in his seventh year of rule, the culminating episode is the ceremonial scene of the Assyrian king visiting the Source of the Tigris (Harmanşah 2007: 194). The upper register portrays a scene of sacrifice and offerings while, within a large cave-like space, the image of the king is carved. In the lower register, the representation features sacrificial animals led toward the source and the carving of the royal effigy on the rocky surface in a realistic and accurate representation of the Birkleyn caves. (Fig. 1). In addition, the bronze band carried a summary inscription above the scene, recording the rituals performed by the Assyrian king.

⁶ For a possible location of the cult-dais of Bazi on Mt. Šaššar/Başâr, see George’s suggestion of the basin of Al-Qawm, which lies to the west of Jebel Bishri. “The basin is the site of many prominent tells of strange formation, partly natural and partly human-made, that lie over springs, so that some are equipped with deep wells. Water from this oasis was still plentiful enough in the early Islamic period to be channeled to the Umayyad fortified settlement at Qasr al-Hair ash-Sharqi, more than thirty kilometers away. The combination of high places and deep water in a single location has been a strategic resource for local pastoralists and long-distance travelers since the Paleolithic era” (George 2009: 13). Instead, according to the Finnish Expedition in Jebel Bishri, the plentitude of water may refer to “the water sources in the eastern central areas such as Nadra which has large springs. Other water sources are at Qebağeb to the south, and as previously mentioned, there are artesian springs at El Kowm on the western piedmont” (Lönnqvist 2011: 200).

⁷ The place traditionally referred to as the Source of the Tigris is characterized by multiple caves, rock outcrops, and gorges, known as the Birkleyn cave system. This geological formation is located at the north of the Diyarbakır Plain, in southeastern Turkey, where the Dibni Su, one of the tributaries of the Tigris, emerges at the end of a 1018-meter-long natural tunnel under the Korha Mountain, and flows southwest through an incised valley. Its paleovalley is surrounded by four other resurgence caves. (Harmanşah 2007: 185; Harmanşah 2014: 147–148; Harmanşah 2015: 127).

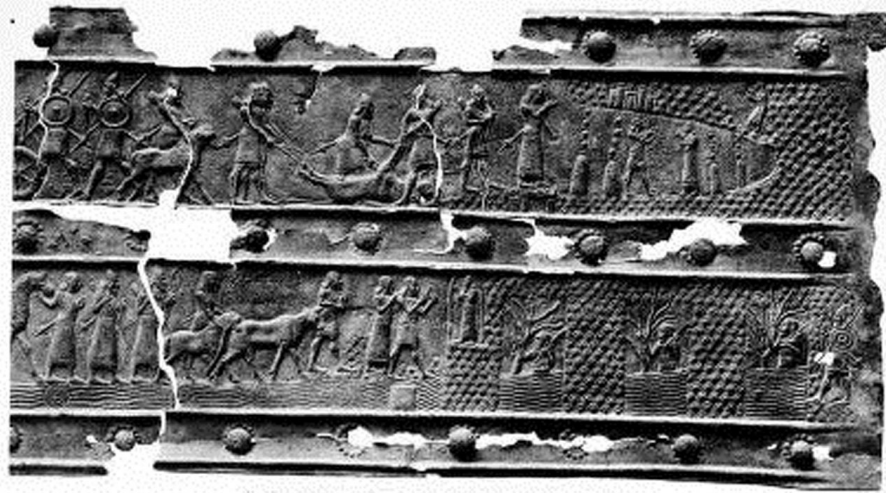


Figure 1. Bronze door reliefs of Shalmaneser III, Tell Balawat (Imgur-Enlil), detail of the relief panel 10 (King 1915, plate LIV)

What is presumable according to Harmanşah is that the Assyrian king communicated with the cults of the place or the cave and thus engaged with the local gods of the rivers and springs that, in the Anatolian/Hurrite traditions, were deities of the underworld referred to as DINGIR.KASKAL.KUR, the “Divine Road of the Earth” (Harmanşah 2014: 151; Harmanşah 2015: 135). Due to Anatolia’s characteristic karstic geology rich in springs, natural tunnels, and caves, the Hittites’ sacred sites were at prominent rocky landscapes and sacred springs. The Hittite expression “Divine Road of the Earth” refers to those divine paths of underground water and the sites where this water emerged above the ground. Considered entrances to the underworld (Erbil/Mouton 2012: 53–74), these symbolically charged liminal places were the main communication channels with ancestors and thresholds of political territories (Harmanşah 2007: 196). Thus, the Source of the Tigris is a relevant example of a cultic place in a natural context that has been subject to veneration and worship for millennia. At this spring, Anatolian and Mesopotamian traditions blended, with the source being conceived as a liminal entity *per se* (as a “Divine Road of the Earth”) and the source of the sacred Tigris.

In Mesopotamian cosmology and religion, rivers were conceived of as privileged channels of communication between the subterranean and the upper world, between the spring and the delta, between their opposing banks, between the dead and the living, between the defiling and the dispelling, all in a dynamic cycle made by their flowing water. These conceptions informed the netherworld characterizations of the rivers. Certain rivers (i.e., the Ḫabur, the Baliḫ and the Ulāya) display characteristics of either encircling the netherworld itself, constituting an obligatory access to the realm of the dead, or leading to it. Their flowing waters did not only carry the spirits of the dead into the underworld, but could transport ancestors, gods, and malevolent and benevolent creatures, thus comprising a medium between the above-

ground human communities and the underground realms. In virtue of the dynamic cycle of their waters, rivers were ideal ritual settings, especially for those concerned with healing and purifying, which took place, wholly or in part, on riverbanks. During such ritual performances, offerings of flour and beer were poured into the watercourse and incantations were proffered toward the fluvial entity. As a channel of communication, the river was an ideal place for contacting the gods (normally Enki/Ea). As previously mentioned, the Babylonian account of the *Flood Story* notes such an incubation ritual, with offerings of incense and prayers presented to the river in order to establish communication between humans and gods. Ea’s message to Atrahasis was carried by the god’s monsters, the Lahmu, through a dream (Lambert/Millard 1999: 76–79; Hecker 2015: 142; Ermidoro 2017: 96–97, 146–148). Despite such an incubation rite being attested only in the *Flood Story*, it is conceivable that it was a widespread practice in all the ancient Near East.⁸

A cosmic and healing tree growing “at the mouth of the rivers”

The intriguing text of the *Incantation of Eridu* (alternatively called the *Incantation of the kiškanû-tree*) describes a cosmic and sacred tree and affirms the materiality of an ancient religious practice. This incantation not only provides perceptions of ancient healing rituals, but also reveals the forest of symbols and correspondences among the healing non-human agents and the different cosmic regions of the Mesopotamian cosmos:

In Eridu a black *kiškanû*-tree grew, created in a pure place,
Its appearance is pure lapis lazuli, which extends into the Apsû.
Ea’s activities in Eridu are full of abundance,
His dwelling is the place of the netherworld,
And his sanctuary is Nammu’s bed.
In a pure temple, which is like a forest with its stretching shadows, (where)
no one shall
enter its midst, (there) are Šamaš and Tammuz.
Between the mouth of the two rivers, Kahegal and Igihegal, the Lahmu-of-
the-Apsû of Eridu,
Took that *kiškanû*-tree, cast the spell of the Apsû, and placed it on the dis-
traught patient’s head. (*Utukkū Lemnūtu*, Tablet XIII, 95–103)⁹

According to this incantation, the *kiškanû*-tree should be understood as a sacred and cosmic tree, whose roots stretch into the Apsû, growing at the “mouth of the two rivers.” As seen, this expression referred to the cosmic springs (presumably of the

⁸ For Mesopotamian incubation see Zgoll 2006: 309–351. Cf. Hittite incubation practices (Mouton 2007).

⁹ Geller 2007: 245; Geller 2016: 460–463.

Tigris and of the Euphrates, or of unspecified cosmic rivers) that poured out from the cosmic Mountain of Sunrise. This mountain, with its sacred forest, was the mirror of the urban temple in Eridu, where presumably a sacred tree grew, perhaps in association with a holy well or pond within the sanctuary. Moreover, in an earlier version, the passage concerning the original place of the tree alluded explicitly to the existence of a holy temple or shrine within a forest, whose shade stretched where no one can proceed. This characterization of secrecy referred directly to the forest located on the slopes of the Mountain of Sunrise. The darkness that enveloped the setting was further expressed by the reference to the shade of the tree, which was equated not only to the shade cast by the shrine, but also to the darkness pervading both the shrine and the forest. This sensorial allusion to non-visibility should be understood as a double reference to the fact that human eyes were unable to see the innermost interior of the temple, much as they were unable to see the midst of the forest on the cosmic mountain. On display here is a dense network of allusions and a play of correspondences and oppositions between darkness and light as well as between the urban sanctuary of the Apsû in Eridu and the cosmic setting of the tree on the Mountain of Sunrise, where it was nurtured by the pure waters of the Apsû. This place of darkness and mystery, where the roots of the tree grow, ensured the pristine purity and healing agency of the *kiškanû*-tree.

Being included in the rituals for dispelling the evil demons of Mesopotamian lore, this incantation was chanted during the healing performance while a piece of *kiškanû*-wood was placed on the head of the patient. The tree thus acted as a repository of favorable energies and divine protections, all invoked and embodied in the wooden stick or wand. Through the physical presence of the tree, the gods and benevolent spirits associated with it were gathered around the sick person during the rite while its therapeutic properties were reinforced through the mythical and religious background re-enactment.

Furthermore, this incantation suggests that the *kiškanû*-tree was a sacred tree of Ea, likely planted within his sanctuary in the city of Eridu. The close connection of this tree with the temple is attested also in the Sumerian hymn of the king Rīm-Sîn, where the *kiškanû*-tree is mentioned as guarding the gates of the interior of the temple (Charpin 1987: 287–289). This hymn addressed the Apsû as a physical part of the temple, as the foundation of the ziggurat, and described its architectural parts as intertwined within a dense network of symbolic allusions between the temple and the mountain, and between the trees guarding its gates and those growing on the cosmic mountain.¹⁰

The unique iconographical representation of *pī nārāti* spring of the literary sources is offered by a (pre-)Sargonic shell seal from the city of Mari (Aruz/Wallenfels

¹⁰ The mysterious identity of the *kiškanû*-tree has variously been identified as a reed stalk, a date palm, or even a cedar, and has some correspondence with the iconography of the Neo-Assyrian Tree. As argued by Giovino, “various texts, as well as clues from the archaeological record, lead us to suppose that the *kiškanû*-tree was (a) an actual tree connected to temples, (b) an artificial tree connected to temples, (c) part of a sacred grove, and (d) used in a cultic role similar to that of a standard” (Giovino 2007: 197). Since there is no clear evidence for establishing the identity of this tree, every interpretation remains speculative.

2003: 220–221; Woods 2005: 17–18). In this seal the two springs are envisioned as two birds from whose beaks the streams pour out, and can be associated with the names of the two sources Kaḫegal, “Mouth-of-Plenty,” and Igiḫegal, “Eye-of-Plenty,” attested in the *Incantation of Eridu* (Fig. 2). This shell seal is relevant also because of its portrayal of a central god sitting on a mountain and flanked by two female half-anthropomorphic and half-fluvial figures. These hybrid female figures are to be understood as a visual representation of the river goddess or river deity (Woods 2005: 18; Aruz/Wallenfels 2003: 220–221).



Figure 2. Mari shell seal (drawing by Anna Perdibon).

Deities of flowing waters: mothers, healers and judges

In the eyes of the ancient Mesopotamians, rivers were polyvalent and fluid entities featuring the attributes of “other-than-human” persons, often of divine status. They appear to have been clearly understood and regarded as deities in the cases when they were explicitly said to be gods, when they were labeled by a cuneiform sign that marked them as divine beings, and when they received treatment reserved for gods (Porter 2009: 161). However, no clear distinction existed between non-human persons and deities in terms of agencies and roles in the myths, incantations and rituals. What can be argued from the written sources is that most rivers were conceived of as gods *per se* in the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE, but progressively lost their divine status. Nonetheless, throughout the 1st millennium they were still considered powerful agents, especially in rituals. These aspects were inextricably intertwined

with their topographical and cosmic natures. Generic rivers (alternatively called Id or Nāru)¹¹ and specific rivers – such as the Tigris, Euphrates, Ḫalḫalla, Baliḫ, Ḫabur, and Ulāya – were all considered cosmic elements, powerful non-human persons, and deities in the relational and sacred cosmos of the ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians.

In the Sumerian myths, the Tigris and Euphrates came into being by Enki's sperm. In contrast, in the *Enūma Eliš* the two rivers are said to have originated from the dismembered body of the ancestral watery progenitor, Tiamat. In fact, after Tiamat's defeat by the champion of the gods, Marduk, this new king of the gods created the world from the body of his primeval grandmother. It is from her eyes (and her tears) that the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates were poured unto the world (*Enūma Eliš* V 53–58; Lambert 2013: 100–101). The sources of the rivers were conceptualized as the eyes of the divine body of the “Mother-of-the-Gods.”¹² Accordingly, the two rivers exhibited a divine origin and nature, being the direct offspring of the female divine ancestor of all gods. In the repertoire of incantations, the river was addressed as a cosmic generating principle, while being created by the great gods, presumably indicating that the conception of the divine River as the primeval mother-goddess was embedded within the realm of the great gods. Another close association of rivers with the deities is expressed in the Sumerian myth *Enlil and Ninlil*, where the river Id-sala was referred to as a holy and pure river, sacred to Enlil. Accordingly, bathing in its water was forbidden. This is a unique attestation of a prohibition of immersing in the waters of a river in the cuneiform world. However, the taboo of bathing seems to be connected to the danger posed by Enlil to women: entering in the waters and breaking the taboo, the female character Ninlil was seduced and impregnated by the god.

The divine River features an intrinsic and widespread duality, which is reflected in its gender fluidity, as attested in the grammar, as well as in the literary and iconographical sources. The Akkadian term for river (*nāru*) is grammatically feminine, but also features a masculine gender, while the Sumerian term (*id*) is masculine (Streck 2000: 298; Woods 2005: 19–20; Lambert 2013: 430). In both written and iconographical sources, rivers are alternatively represented as female and male entities (Woods 2005: 19–20; Lambert 2013: 430). As well expressed in the iconographical representations, River is often portrayed as female or male, half-anthropomorphic and half-water dyad. Moreover, occurrences of a divine fluvial couple, comprising a male and a female deity, are recorded in the Mesopotamian written sources (i.e. the Assyrian divine couple Ḫabur and Ḫaburtum), while the names of certain rivers in the dual form (e.g. the Baliḫ) further expressed its dual nature.¹³ The terms Nāru and

¹¹ Both *Nāru* and *Id*, here translated as River, are to be identified with both the cosmic divine river as well as nearby rivers, tributaries or channels.

¹² In a 1st-millennium learned commentary on the *Enūma Eliš*, additional details of the origin of the two rivers are preserved. In this commentary, the Tigris is said to be Tiamat's right eye, while the Euphrates her left one (Livingstone 1989, 101: 3).

¹³ See, e.g., Mander 2008: 64; Gordon 1992: 127; Woods 2005: 21; Meinhold 2009: 160. A comparison with a neighboring divine river is provided by the Nile, which was represented as a hermaphroditic being, depicted with

Id both refer to the divine River, preventing a clear differentiation between female and male based solely on grammar. Throughout the literature, references to the life-giving River are generally to a goddess or a dyad of female deities while references to River in its role of supreme judge of the River Ordeal mention masculine traits. This intrinsic duality can be ascribed to physical and symbolic attributes. Physically, such a duality can be seen as a reference to the terminal points of a watercourse (i.e., source and delta), to an alternation of underground and over-ground traits, or to its opposing banks. This last interpretation appears to be supported by the visual representations of the river deity as a dyad (Woods 2005). Symbolically, River is connected to life and death and to light and darkness, being a twofold, fluid, and contradictory entity. Furthermore, River is often described as self-renewing and self-regenerating, evidence that would point to the understanding of River as a hermaphroditic being.

In its female garb, River is conceptualized as a goddess, the mother of all beings. In the *River Incantation*, a widely attested text, River is called upon as the "creatress of everything":

You, River! Creatress of everything!
 When the great gods dug you,
 They placed favor at your side.
 Within you Ea, king of the Apsû, built his dwelling.
 He gave you fierceness, radiance and dread,
 The "irresistible flood" he called your name,
 The wisdom of Ea and Asalluḫi they gave you.
 You judge the judgment of mankind.
 River, you are great! River, you are lofty!
 River, you are upright, your water keeps things in order. (Lambert 2013: 396)

This incantation expresses all the features characterizing River in the Mesopotamian cosmology and religion: River emerged fully in its divine garb of the cosmic river goddess, as the deity presiding over the River Ordeal, and as a cosmic place connected with the Apsû. The divine River is described both as the creatress of everything and as being created by the great gods, which assigned it fierceness, radiance and terror, along with the name "irresistible flood," a clear reference to the practice of the River Ordeal. The legal context is affirmed further in the text, where River is referred to as judging humanity and keeping things in order through carrying away any sin and defilement. Simultaneously, River was addressed in its topographical attribute, as the place where the god Ea builds his dwelling, the Apsû (Bottéro/Kramer 1989: 288–291; Beaulieu 1992/1993: 58–60). The life-giving and divine attributes are expressed in another incantation preserved in the evil-dispelling ritual *Šurpu* ("Blazing") where River is addressed as the "River of the gods, who has borne everything" (Reiner 1958: 47–48). In its life-giving and motherly attributes, River

beard and breasts, but without genitalia. The divine Nile was also represented as a pair, which symbolized its role unifying Upper and Lower Egypt (Woods 2005: 21; Butzer 2001: 550).

was envisioned as a regenerating and nurturing goddess, who took care of all life and provided abundance and fertility to all creatures and places.

Specific rivers were clearly addressed as mothers, especially in personal names and in their accompanying epithets. The Tigris and Euphrates were both attested as mothers in their personal names and were connected to bounty and abundance in some epithets attested in ritual texts. The Tigris in particular was conceptualized as a nurturing mother and a merciful and attentive goddess who listened to the prayers of her devotees yet also demanded proper worship. Moreover, the Tigris was considered the mother of animals (i.e., reptiles) and of the mountains themselves. Indeed, the mountains were conceived as having been generated by the flowing waters of the rivers ʕalḥalla and Tigris. These two rivers display a syncretism which occurred during the 2nd millennium BCE, according to which the ʕalḥalla, a legendary eastern river of the Sumerian cosmological horizon, merged into the Tigris, which assumed the epithet of “mother-of-the-mountains” (Blaschke 2018). Other specific rivers featuring motherly attributes were the Duran, which was called the “mother of the rivers” itself, and the Araḥtum (Reiner 1956; Groneberg 1980: 274–275). The latter was a main affluent of the Euphrates and was addressed as “the one that brings life to Babylon”, alluding to its life-bringing agency for human communities and their cities.

The powerful healing agency of River was fully expressed in the realm of evil-dispelling and healing incantations and rituals. Both the divine River (Id) and specific rivers were called upon during the purifying rituals, where they were accompanied by epithets specifying their cleansing agency and associated with deities involved in the therapeutic arts. The Tigris was recorded as part of the entourage of Gula, the healing goddess in the Neo-Assyrian royal rituals (Parpola 2017: 134), while the Me-kalkal was addressed as “healer of (every) living being” in the *Lipšur Litanies* (Reiner 1956). In the *Lipšur Litanies* several rivers and channels, along with mountains, were called upon to release and purify an afflicted patient. The text referred to these fluvial entities as animated agents and powerful “other-than-human” persons capable of protecting and acting against evil forces. The names of the watercourses were accompanied by epithets whose motifs are life, abundance, and order, while some are related to animals and to gods (Reiner 1956: 134–135).

In virtue of its cleansing agency, River was conceived as one of the great cleansers of humankind. This notion constituted the conceptual basis for the practice of the River Ordeal. As mentioned above, in the *Song of Bazi* the waters that filled the temple of the herder god Bazi were evenly divided between those of death and those of life, matching the context of the River Ordeal. This judicial context is further expressed in the text, where Id, Šakkan and Šamaš were called upon to judge, slay, and purify those convicted of witchcraft, murder (lit. “the one of blood”), or sorcery (George 2009: 7–8; Zgoll 2015: 68–69). In this context, Id appeared as a major god which established verdicts and proclaimed the innocence or guilt of the accused person. As an impartial judge, River often accompanied the Sun, the supreme judge of humankind, during the rituals. An eloquent example of River’s agency and the

materiality of ancient Mesopotamian religious and healing experiences is offered by an anti-witchcraft incantation preserved in the ritual *Maqlû*, "Burning" (Abusch 2015). In this context River was invoked with the formula: "May pure River smash her heart. May the pure waters of River release her witchcraft. And may I, like River, become pure in my mountain" (*Maqlû* III 85–87; Abusch 2015: 307). River was called upon in order to act personally against the *kaššāptu* (the Mesopotamian witch) by smashing her heart, so that its waters may release the patient from her evil craft. The association of River with the Sun speaks to the conception which saw the Sun emerging from the cosmic mountain in the East, mythical setting where destinies were established at every daybreak and from which the mythical river flowed (Abusch 2002; Abusch 2015; Polonsky 1999; Polonsky 2006; Woods 2009).

In the legal practice of the River Ordeal, River, generally referred to by the name *Id* and featuring male traits, comprised both the role of the divine judge presiding over the establishment of the verdict and the physical body of the divine River Ordeal itself. The Sumerian river *Id-kura* ("River-of-the-Mountain" or "River-of-the-Netherworld") was the embodiment of the Ordeal and the infernal characterizations ascribed to River in association with this legal practice, as further expressed by its epithet of "Man-Eating-River" (*Idlurugu*). In the Akkadian context, the divine River, *Id*, should be primarily identified with the Euphrates. This assumption is based on the joint evidence of the actual settings of the River Ordeal and the proper worship of River. The cult of *Id* was consistently attested in the cities of Tuttul, Mari, Hit, and Sippar, all cities along the course of the Euphrates, particularly during the 2nd millennium BCE (Woods 2005: 33–34; Sasson 2015). The actual legal practice of the River Ordeal was performed mainly along the course of this river, particularly at Hit, a locality famous for its thermal and sulphureous springs (Heimpel 1996). This thermal spot, rich of gases emitted by the springs, was particularly suitable for practicing the Ordeal: throwing the accused person into the sulphureous springs lessened his or her chances of being proven innocent.

The fully divine status of River, whether referenced as the generic deity *Id* or by a specific name, is further demonstrated by cultic action. Royal letters, records of offerings, and even the giving of personal names attested a particular piety and worship from the 3rd millennium BCE up to the Neo-Assyrian period through which River was addressed and praised as lord, god, judge and protector (Roberts 1972: 46; Porter 2009: 161–162; Lambert 2013: 430; Durand 2008: 291–292). The most extensive evidence of worship of the divine River can be found along the course of the Euphrates. Epigraphic and iconographic evidence from the cities of Mari and Sippar is emblematic of a profound devotion toward the fluvial deity spanning from the 3rd to the 2nd millennium. In the city of Mari, votive vessels, inscriptions, and celebratory pictorial scenes attest to a vivid religious and devotional life of the divine River up until the Old Babylonian period (Cooper 1986: 87; Woods 2005: 34–35). As seen in royal epistolary correspondence, kings appeared particularly devoted to River, indicating an intriguing association between water, rivers, and sovereignty (Sasson 2015). A representative case is that of Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, who referred to *Id* as

his lord and commissioned the so-called *Investiture Fresco*, which featured a feminine couple in a watery setting that can be considered as the representation of the divine Euphrates through a female dyad. (Fig. 3).¹⁴ Also the city of Sippar, whose name and location is closely related to the Euphrates, should be considered an early holy site associated with this river (Woods 2005: 37–39). Sippar, whose name means “City of the Euphrates,” was traversed by a network of tributaries and channels joining the Tigris. This maze-like confluence between the two rivers created a perfect natural setting for the worship of the fluvial deity. Moreover, at least from the 3rd millennium, the city was the religious center of Šamaš, the sun god as the supreme judge of humankind. It can be assumed that a synergic relationship between these two gods took place in the city of Sippar, where the association of Šamaš and Id resulted in enhancing the judicial roles of both deities (Woods 2005: 42). This intimate connection continued through the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE, fully expressed in the evil-dispelling and healing rituals.

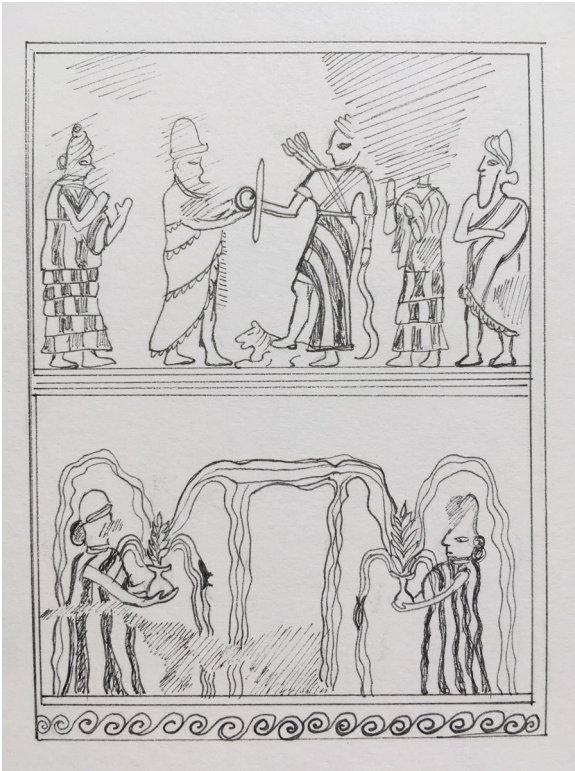


Figure 3. Detail of the Fresco of Zimri-Lim, Mari palace (drawing by Anna Perdibon).

¹⁴ As pointed out by Woods, the placing of the divine Euphrates in the lower register of a scene which aims at establishing the king's legitimacy probably refers to the deeply rooted belief in water as the basis of everything, including kingship (Woods 2005: 18–19).

The divine Euphrates featured a marked gender alternation and was often recorded with a dual or plural form. While the Euphrates was the "mother" when addressed as *Purattu* (the Akkadian name of the Euphrates), it appeared mainly conceived as a masculine deity when referred to as *Id*. This evidence leads to the suggestion, supported by iconographical representations, that the Euphrates was conceptualized as a dyad. The gender alternation of the Euphrates was not notable in the conceptualizations of the Tigris, which appeared generally as a motherly goddess, skilled in the healing and nurturing crafts.¹⁵ The veneration of the divine River was a predominantly northern religious phenomenon and thus should be understood as bound to the topography. In the upper courses of the Euphrates and Tigris evidence of the cult of the divine River stretches from the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE to the Neo-Assyrian period. In contrast, evidence of fluvial worship in the Southern Sumer is much scarcer. Both in the Sumerian context and in the later tradition from the South, the presence of River seemed to be almost entirely associated with the River Ordeal and with the cosmic river in the mythical evidence (Woods 2005; Woods 2009). River ceased to be worshipped as a deity *per se* after the second millennium, though it remained a powerful divine agent and person in rituals and incantations throughout the first millennium, especially in Assyrian context. With its body of flowing waters with their powers of healing, purifying, generating, and destroying, River was considered a proper non-anthropomorphic (or half-anthropomorphic) deity (either female or male according to the context). Its cosmic and life-generating agency merged with the role of an impartial judge of humankind, as well as with its purifying and expunging attributes. These three concepts were deeply rooted and entangled with regard to River as a person and deity in the Mesopotamian worldview.

Conclusions

Identifying ways in which ancient Mesopotamians related to and engaged with their sensuous world, the collected evidence can readily dialogue with studies of the historical and contemporary relationships of religion and nature by reconsidering the conceptions of divinity, personhood and nature in an ancient civilization. Water, rivers, and springs had different agencies in the religious life of the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia and played varied roles in relationship to other non-human agents such as trees, mountains, and deities. Water featured an intriguing network of symbolic, ritual, and therapeutic meanings that were closely related with the cosmic subterranean place of pristine purity, the *Apsû*. With their bodies of flowing waters, rivers and watercourses shaped both the physical and mythical landscape: they were conceived of as cosmic entities in complex network of relations with the cosmic mountain, the sun, and the *Apsû* as "other-than-human" persons, often char-

¹⁵ Other rivers display a fully divine status, in various locations and in different periods (e.g., the *Balîh*, the *Ulāya*, the *Ḥabur*, the *Daban*, *Diyala*, and the Lower and Upper *Zab*).

acterized by divine status. They were portrayed as mothers, healers, and judges, but also liminal and sacred places of intersection and encounter between the different realms and inhabitants of the cosmos, in a fluid and dynamic exchange of waters flowing back and forth to the Apsû. According to this portrayal, it can be suggested that the ancient Mesopotamian cosmos and landscape was conceptualized as sacred, relational, and therapeutic, where no strict distinction between the natural and supernatural, and the immanent and transcendent appears to have existed.

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"Između ušća dviju rijeka". Djelovanje vode, izvora, rijeka i drveća u drevnoj mezopotamskoj kozmologiji i religiji

Rad nudi antropološki pogled na svete vode, izvore, svete rijeke i drveće u religijskom okviru drevne Mezopotamije. Voda je sveprisutna u mezopotamskim mitovima i ritualima, osobito u vezi s kozmičkim Apsúom, praizvorom svih voda. Netaknuta voda izvire iz planinskih izvora i tvori riječna tijela. Za Babilonce i Asirce rijeke i vodotoci bili su sveti i kozmički entiteti i često su ih štovali kao božanstva. Osobito su se Tigris i Eufrat pojavljivali kao riječna božanstva, a imali su životvornu, majčinsku, iscjeliteljsku i sudačku ulogu. Članak razmatra međuodnose između Apsúa, izvora i svetih rijeka te povezanog svetog drveća, planina i antropomorfnih božanstava, nastojeći ponuditi novu perspektivu na drevne mezopotamske predodžbe o prirodi, religiji i kozmosu.

Ključne riječi: religija, kozmologija, mitski i terapijski krajolik, ne-ljudsko djelovanje, voda, rijeke, izvori