

“Imperial Claims and the Role of Henotheism in Ancient Mesopotamian Societies”

Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum

In terms of historical chronotope Ancient Mesopotamia is characterized by the continuous formation and transformation of political systems – from city state to empire (and back). The associated processes were shaped and permeated by religious belief systems, religion supplying the structures of societal meta-discourse. This gives rise to the question of how and/or to what degree the changes in the political system are reflected in religious discourse and its material manifestations. The long history of state formation in Ancient Mesopotamia – three millennia – shows several attempts for the building of empires. Political theology plays a major, even crucial role in the architecture of these empires a major task being the balance of religious powers.

My paper will focus on three aspects closely associated with this process of balancing:

1. The legal aspect: From the textual documentation it appears that questions of ownership were a dynamic force in the configuration of early states. I will argue, that the concept of the divine landlord – though originally configured as a solution for local institutional households – became the blueprint for imperial configurations.
2. The religious aspect: the emergence of individual deities as overlords and heads of imperial panthea is to be understood on the one hand as the result of oversizing local city-gods; on the other hand, it seems likely that the organization of imperial leadership in the mundane sphere was mirrored in the divine sphere.
3. As a result from this configuration (1.+2.) it can be shown that religion wasn't the motif for imperial claims, yet a means to realize them.

After a short introduction to the history of state formation and a comparative view of four moments of empire-building, I will develop my arguments along the history of the Assyrian empire.