INSTITUT für Orientalistik

Mesopotamian Scapegoat Rites
Reconstructing a Group of Ancient Ritual Practices

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Abstract:

In this lecture I will present an initial outline of my ongoing habilitation project. The project aims to provide a reconstruction and analysis of a series of related ritual practices, associated with the Mesopotamian exorcist ($\bar{a}\check{s}ipu$), which are usually described in the modern literature as 'scapegoat' rites. The term 'scapegoat' has its origins in English translations of the Old Testament of Leviticus and in the Mesopotamian context usually translates the technical term maš$_2$-ḫul-dub$_2$-ba, literally 'goat that expels evil'. This refers to one of a group of animals, including goats, sheep, and gazelles, that were used to remove evil when purifying people and buildings.

These animals are not attested in a ritual of their own, but form part of several different rituals, including *Bīt rimki*, *Bīt mēseri*, and Udug-ḫul, where they are sometimes accompanied by a short series of Sumerian incantations that situate them within a broader mythological context. I bring together this rather sparse evidence to assess whether we can reconstruct a single group of ritual practices, how they worked, their place among other substitution and expulsion rites involving animals, and whether their designation as 'scapegoat' rites is ultimately justified. The result is not only a synthesis of the Mesopotamian ritual practices but also a case study in reconstructing the practical realities behind technical ritual texts, as well as providing a point of comparison for similar rites found in neighbouring cultures of ancient West Asia.

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