

## SACRED TIMES AND SPACES

### Mesopotamia

#### *Sacred Times*

The Mesopotamian concept of time finds its expression in two complementary models: linear progression, as in the case of a human life or in history; and cyclic, periodical return, as determined by nature, such as day and night, lunar months, and solar years. Prominent points in these cycles mark the appropriate times for religious festivals; events of historical time are not important.

A month begins with the first appearance of the crescent moon in the evening sky; consequently, nightfall marks the beginning of a new day. Twelve months usually add up to a year, which starts ideally at the vernal equinox. The difference between the 354-day lunar year and the 365-day solar year is compensated for by the occasional insertion of an extra month. This division of time (i.e., a year divided into twelve or thirteen months, each containing twenty-nine or thirty days) was used in everyday business as well as in the cult.

Months are divided into days, and a specific time of the day may be especially suited for certain religious matters. Magic rituals usually have to be performed in the early morning, before daybreak. The morning hours were also of special significance in temple rituals. A month is further divided according to lunar phases (new moon on day 1, first quarter on day 6/7, full moon on day 14/15), and thus forms the backbone of the cultic calendars of Mesopotamia. The three days already mentioned mark monthly festivals held in many temples, especially during the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BCE. In these cases, cultic rituals and offerings are performed for the highest gods of a city, but the divine power of the moon per se is not venerated. The disappearance of the moon at the end of the month is considered a time of danger, especially for the king; mourning rites are performed (often by the queen) in order that these days may pass safely.

The days of a month are counted simply by number,

but these numbers always represent a cosmic order, because each day always corresponds to a specific lunar phase. This might, to some extent, explain the importance in Mesopotamia of hemerologies or menologies (manuals that list felicitous days or months). The practical relevance of hemerologies has been tested against records of the Neo-Assyrian royal court (7th century BCE), and it turns out that extispicy reports (reports on what the organs of a sacrificed animal signify) are usually not dated to those days that are forbidden for extispicy in the hemerologies, namely, days that are related to certain phases of the lunar disc.

*The agricultural year and its festivals.* The agriculture of southern Mesopotamia depended on irrigation. Therefore, the agricultural year was primarily determined by the weather and to a lesser extent by the water level of the Euphrates and Tigris. The annual flooding occurred in spring (April/May). Sowing of seed, mostly barley, took place in autumn (October/November). In April/May the grain was harvested; the vegetation then dried up during summer until the rains started again in autumn.

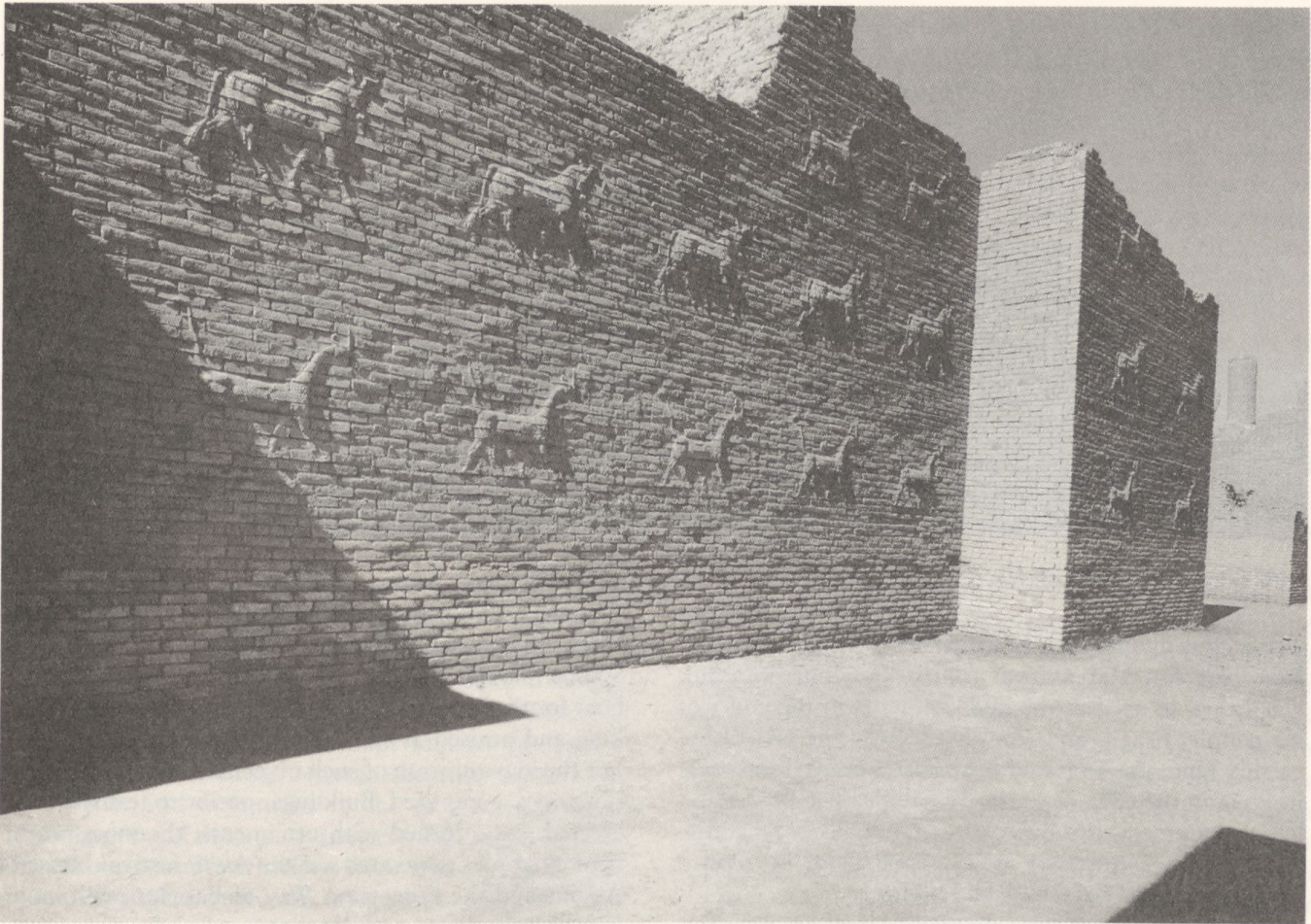
In early Mesopotamia, the agricultural year was reflected in festival and month names. Directly linked to the farmer's work were the important festivals of Sowing the Seed and Cutting the Grain. At Ur, these so-called *Akitu* festivals were fixed respectively at the autumnal and vernal equinoxes. Interestingly, these festivals, like others, were celebrated at the very beginning of the work. Thus, the sowing season started with a ritual plowing of the first furrow. This was done by the king as a representative of the whole country; the divine blessing that followed applied to the king and to his country as well. Furthermore, the timing of the festival allowed for a certain concentration of the population within the settlements (before it dispersed into the fields); and the festive gathering also provided an appropriate beginning to collective labor. In addition to these official cults, more modest rites were required to secure the prosperity of the fields. The festivals at the end of the plowing period, and especially at harvest, only rarely surpassed those celebrated at the beginning, however.

On a more metaphorical level, the life of vegetation and its death in late spring was reflected in the Dumuzi cycle and its female celebrations in springtime (see Myth and Sacred Narratives). The dead were remembered during the festival/month of Abu (August), when the whole land dried up.

*Local deities and their festivals.* Each Mesopotamian city had its own, local deities, which were often conceived of as families with their own courts. Marriage between gods was also a prominent festival theme. Within the main temples the gods received offerings as their daily food, and they also figured prominently in the monthly and annual festivals. Their cult was maintained by the local ruler and his family.

The highest festival of a local deity in Sumer was his or her "New Year" (e.g., the Great Festival of Nanna at





The Procession Way at Ishtar Gate, Babylon. *Hirmer Fotoarchiv*

Ur). The festival usually featured a procession to a rural sanctuary (see also the state festivals below); here also the spatial extension of the deity's area of influence was demonstrated. It was on only this occasion that the deity left the temple and could be seen by the common people. The return of the god was a triumphal *adventus* to his chosen city and temple, which he would inhabit for another year. As represented in Sumerian hymns, the divine King Enlil decreed the particular god's good fate at such an occasion. In ritual, the bathing and dressing of the divinity's statue, which took place at this time, apparently reflected the annual renewal of the god's power.

*State festivals.* The king represented his country before the gods. As such he played a prominent role in the most important festivals, which were considered state festivals. Two prominent examples of such festivals are offered here.

The Tummal festival was held in Nippur under the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (21st century BCE). Being the city of the divine king, Enlil, Nippur held first rank among the cult places of Babylonia at that time; shortly thereafter (Isin Dynasty, 20th century BCE), it even achieved the unique position of a religious capital like later Babylon or Asshur.

The Tummal festival started at the end of the seventh

month (about October) with rites at the Duku (a mound representing a cosmic locality where the primordial gods dwelled; see further Sacred Times) at the temple of Enlil at Nippur. According to later, more explicit sources, the dead forefathers of Enlil, who were apparently the source of his supreme power, were mourned. This ceremony took place at the end of the month, when no moon was visible. With the beginning of the new month, the cult statues of the divine pair Enlil and his wife Ninlil, accompanied by the other gods of Nippur and by the king, left the city by boat and journeyed to the nearby cult center of Tummal, where the elite of the country gathered. According to administrative documents, large quantities of drink and food, especially meat, were distributed to the people. After celebrations and offerings at Tummal, the gods returned to Nippur, whereupon they decreed a good fate for the king. The king also attended other festivals at Nippur and elsewhere, including the Gusu festival, the main festival of the warrior-god Ninurta, the son of Enlil.

The most prominent festival of ancient Mesopotamia, the New Year or *Akitu* festival of Babylon, is documented by sources from the 1st millennium BCE. It took place during the first twelve days of the first month Nisannu (about April). Gods from Babylonian cities





Ziggurat (Temple Tower) at Ur, ca. 2100 BCE. Hirmer Fotoarchiv

visited the divine king Marduk/Bel, first among them Marduk's son Nabu, from nearby Borsippa. Marduk was called to appear, the gods gathered in the court of his temple, Esagil, and Marduk decreed the fate of the earthly king; the king had previously received his royal insignia in the cella of the god's temple. The procession left the temple, crossed the city, and finally reached the *Akitu* house, a sanctuary in the steppe. Upon his return, Marduk decreed the fate of the country.

Various aspects of this complex festival are relevant. On the mythological level, it represented Marduk's fight against the primordial ocean, his creation of the cosmos, and his subsequent exaltation as narrated in the *Enuma Elish*, which was recited on day 4. On the cultic level, it represented the festive *adventus* of Marduk to his cella, the annual reinstallation of his cult within Babylon, and the paying of respects to the divine king by the other gods. Politically significant was the reinstallation of the human king and his participation in the procession (his "taking Bel by the hand") and the god's decreeing of fate for king and country. A replica of this festival was installed in Asshur during the 7th century BCE.

*Cultural and social aspects of festivals.* The holidays brought about by the festivals stood in contrast to normal workdays. People apparently did not have to work during festivals, but instead participated in colorful processions, which were accompanied by music and dancing. They received beverages and even meat, a luxury item, as part of the "conspicuous consumption" that marked the event. Festivals thus appealed to all the participants' senses.

Various art forms thrived in the context of festivals. Prayers to the gods and hymns to gods and rulers were composed and subsequently recited at festivals. Contest debates between cultural entities (e.g., grain and cattle) were performed for the entertainment of the audience. Our few attestations of sports (wrestling, running) from

Mesopotamia situate them within the context of festivals. Specific paraphernalia for the cult—such as a procession boat for the Tummal festival—were commissioned by the king and praised as examples of skillful workmanship. For the inauguration of such objects, hymns and inscriptions were composed. Buildings specific to festivals were erected and adorned with ornaments; the most prominent examples excavated are the *Akitu* festival house of Asshur and the Procession Way of Babylon with its reliefs of bulls, lions, and dragons.

The enormous economic expenses of a festival were covered by special contributions; such religious "taxes" are well attested for the 3rd millennium BCE. Members of the elite contributed goods such as silver, animals, or milk and cream; such goods were later distributed during the festival. This process replicated the redistribution of goods that was so important in the early ancient Near East; furthermore, the remains of offerings were distributed to particular servants of the temple. Thus the festival's social aspects became apparent to those involved. Because the fulfillment of basic needs was directly dependent on the temple and its festivals, the dates of the festivals became firmly embedded in the public consciousness.

In addition to the public festivals with their processions and excessive consumption, we know of a festival commemorating the dead ancestors during the summer heat in Abu, of festivals celebrating the harvest, and of special rites, such as the release of doves on New Year's Day.

Significant elements of festivals are the economic and social aspects of the redistribution of festival goods and the tendency of festivals to be set at times when the population can be brought together. The role of festivals in representing, preserving, and creating the right social order also becomes apparent on various occasions: the songs recited at festivals provided examples of correct order; the ruler was installed and thus validated

by the main god; and the local gods, a focal point of the self-identification of cities and their hinterland, manifested themselves during the annual processions. All of these observations may help to explain why festival dates were so rigorously honored not only from the 3rd millennium to the 1st millennium—that is, within cuneiform culture—but even survived the end of that culture, until the first centuries CE.

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