

# At the Threshold of Ritual and *Theater*

## Another Means on Looking at a Mesopotamian Ritual

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The threshold between ritual and *theater*<sup>1</sup> is a fluid one. Although it seems to be easy to define actions as being either ritual or *theater*, there are many phenomena that are not fixed exclusively on one side of this border. However, the question of definition seems to depend on the perspective of the observer. For example, Holy Communion as a part of the Roman Catholic mass is a ritual for all communicants as well as for the priest, but it can also be viewed as *theater* for observers who are not familiar with or participating in the rite. Are these aspects mutually exclusive or two sides of the same coin? Is it possible to look at a Mesopotamian ritual – in the following, the Babylonian Akītu-procession of the first millennium B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> – and ask, whether there are moments that belong to the realm of *theater* and whether the use of terms like *staging* or *role* is warranted for an analysis of ancient actions? Furthermore, if *theater* as used in a modern, European perspective is mostly associated with education, what can be said about the communication of knowledge<sup>3</sup> concerning the Akītu-procession?

To find a way through the jungle of terms, their meanings and associations, a closer look at the terminology might be fruitful. Although what is meant by *theater* may seem obvious, it will be clear that there is no sure singular definition. A description of the spring Akītu-Festival for Marduk in first millennium Babylon will follow, with a special focus on the aspects of corporality, multi-sensual ostentation, event, and representation, all of which can also be associated with *theater*. In this context, the question of the Akītu-procession as a medium of communication will be raised. Because performing traditions of antiquity are often associated with the Greek forms of tragedy

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid the misconception of the existence of only one, universal and ahistoric understanding of “theater,” in certain cases, the term will be set in italic, i.e. *theater*.

<sup>2</sup> The term “Akītu,” now used for the whole festival, refers originally to a house outside the city, where sacrifices were offered to Marduk. In the following, the topographical names and their locations are used referring to GEORGE 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Although the focus of this conference proceedings is on teaching morality, here, this aspect will not be taken into account. The question of what the Mesopotamians understood by morality cannot be presented sufficiently. Thus, the emphasis will be the question of knowledge transfer, which appears to be a part (albeit not the only one) of education.

and comedy as well as the satyr play, Greek and Mesopotamian perspectives will be put side by side in a brief excursus. At the end, it will be questioned whether the Mesopotamian ritual was, among other things, a medium of knowledge.

### Ritual and *Theater*: A Closer Look at Terminology

Looking at definitions of the term “ritual” reveals a huge intermediate space between rituals as institutional actions (e.g., the Roman Catholic mass) and the ritualization of everyday actions (e.g., teeth brushing).<sup>4</sup> In the following, rituals are understood as the conscious, targeted, and symbolic actions of several participants, which are characterized by a standardization of its outer appearance, by its repeatability, and by the ostentation of physical movements that serve to establish order.<sup>5</sup> This applies to the Akītu-procession, which can therefore be named a ritual. Rituals and rites are often defined in different ways, so for the purpose of this article, the term “rite” refers to the particular actions and the term “ritual” alludes to the entirety of all rites belonging to a larger complex.<sup>6</sup>

During the last decades, terms belonging to the semantic fields of “theater” and “performance” are used in an inflationary manner in humanities, particularly in contexts of the social sciences as well as that of theology or religious studies. Scholars tend to label phenomena from historical or contemporary ritual contexts with terms such as “theater” as well as “role,” “performance,” “staging,” “scene,” “screenplay,” “actor,” “audience,” and, of course, “cultic drama” or “ritual drama.” Although, this may sound interesting and even convincing, it leads to the problem that it is often not clear what is meant by these terms. In many cases, they refer to a modern, bourgeois, and European (or Western) understanding of what is called *theater*.<sup>7</sup> This means that

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. BROSIUS/MICHAELS/SCHRODE 2013, 13. Because the focus is on the Akītu-procession, here, the question of the borderline of both aspects is not of interest.

<sup>5</sup> For definitions, see, among others, BROSIUS/MICHAELS/SCHRODE 2013, 13–15; RAO/KÖPPING 2008, 5–7; STOLLBERG-RILINGER 2013, 7–17; DÜCKER 2007, 29–30.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the recitation of a prayer at a processional station is one rite of the whole ritual of the Akītu-procession. For an opposing perspective see, for example, GRIMES 2010, 6–9.

<sup>7</sup> This applies more to the English term, because the meaning differs from the German one. While in English, the term “theater” is used in a narrow way linked to the closed institutional theater, based on textual dramas, the German “Theater” can also refer in a broader sense to social actions of everyday life. Cf. FISCHER-LICHTE 2016, 29. As a result, “theater” and “performance” are then distinguished in a way that “theater” leads to the concrete form of art, while “performance” can refer to performance art as well as to aspects of social behavior etc. In German, “theater” and “performance” are not separated in this way, thus they both may reference to elements of everyday life, e.g., political or religious actions as well as social interactions. Clear definitions, like the attempt of FISCHER-LICHTE 2016 in distinguishing “theatricality” and “performativity” are hardly helpful. Terms belonging to the lexical field of “performance” would be mainly used to focus on the self-reference of actions as well as on their reality establishing power. In contrast, terms with a word root in “theater” (like, e.g., “theatricality”) would refer to the cultural conditioned phenomena of the European tradition and emphasize primarily staging and ostentation of actions and behavior. Nonetheless, both would refer to cultural actions and try to analyze them from different perspectives. See FISCHER-

one expects a special, mostly darkened room with a stage for the active actors and seats for the passive spectators. Furthermore, a piece of literature, the written play, is staged by a director and performed by actors, who make believe that they 'are' the roles they play. In many cases, *theater* is reduced to its narrative.<sup>8</sup> The roles are individuals with their own specific character, which develops during the play. At the end, there is a moral message for the spectators that should make them reflect on a particular issue of the play. Mostly, these ideas and associations of *theater* are said to be Greek and therefore have a historical origin and are valuable. That the ancient Greeks invented *theater* and thus all European ideas on this cultural form might be rooted in Greek tragedy is a very common claim.<sup>9</sup> However, things are never that easy, and the phenomenon called *theater* is much more complicated due to its historicity. Looking at the Greek traditions, it is striking that they are mainly reduced to one form, i.e. tragedy and interpreted from a modern point of view, overlooking analyses of it as an ancient phenomena of the Aegean world and the Greek *polis*.<sup>10</sup> For example, concerning modern forms from the beginning of the last century on, there are many ideas of *theater* that do not require a darkened room, a strict distinction between actors and audience, a script, a director, or a moral message.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is a misinterpretation to reduce even modern *theater* to one limited form of acting in the European or Western context and much more to do so of ancient phenomena.

In many cases, researchers prefer the terms "performative" or "performance," but they are also problematic due to the fact that they have different meanings in disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, the science of art, or gender stud-

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LICHTE 2016, 29. However, both aspects are not unique features and, therefore, seem to be interchangeable.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this mirrors a preference of myth to ritual in the discussion linked to the myth-and-ritual-school.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. KOTTE 2014, 54–57 and 59. This is indicated by the esteem concerning Attic traditions, for example, when a description of the history of theater from the perspective of religious studies starts with a presentation of the cult of Dionysus in Athens. Cf., e.g., ZIMMERMANN 2005, 210–11. In many cases, this is a more literary approach. Cf. KOTTE 2012, 220. Greek tragedy is not *the theater par excellence* (neither in ancient Greece nor in general), but one form, which is like comedy and satyr play – in comparison to other ancient phenomena – particularly characterized by its institutionality. Furthermore, it is problematic if research literature refers mainly to Aristoteles's *Poetic*, which primarily presents his ideas about tragedy (which is mostly, but inclusively, interpreted as value judgment by the ancient author towards comedy) and focuses primarily on the myth as a collocation of occurrences (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 6: FUHRMANN 2005, 18–25). On doing so, aspects of performance in terms of presentation take a backseat.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, Greek traditions appear as the main origin of Western artistic *theater*, which is a circular argument. Institutional *theater* is rooted in Greek tragedy and therefore, one can only find familiar elements in the ancient tradition, which legitimates their own tradition in turn. By doing so, all foreign elements, such as the rigid looking masks, the chorus, or the ancient gods, are ignored. This questionable handling can also be seen by the example of current productions of Greek dramas at various theater-houses. See, e.g., PILZ 2007, 4–7.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, variant traditions are not reduced to one period, but can be found in all times, for example in the Middle Ages. For an anthropological approach to the relationship between different kinds of European traditions belonging to the realm of *theater*, see BAUMBACH 2012.

ies.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the term “performance” has a wide semantic field and can mean any human action.<sup>13</sup> In the context of rituals, it only indicates that a ritual or rite is put into effect. Thus, while *theater* is mostly understood too narrowly, the definition of “performance” is getting out of hand. To avoid the Eurocentric pitfall of claiming only one specific tradition as *the theater par excellence*, it is advisable to avoid both terms. When necessary in the following analysis of the ancient phenomena, I will use “theatrical” instead of “theater”<sup>14</sup> while referring to specific aspects of the Greek traditions<sup>15</sup> and “performing” instead of “performance” when focusing on elements of the Mesopotamian (or general aspects of the Greek) ritual. However, all of these terms are contaminated and there seems to be no terminology that is free of European ideas and prejudices. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of these Eurocentric and colonial implications associated with naming non-modern and non-European phenomena as performances or *theater*.

A distinct problem is the so-called ritual or cultic drama, especially in ancient cultures. This is a common idea, as, for example, Nielsen shows in her book *Cultic Theatres and Ritual Dramas*. She defines ritual drama as a “dramatic performance with a plot taken from the myth of the god in whose honor it was enacted as a ritual during the festive liturgy, often with the active participation of the worshippers.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, it is a combination of ritual and myth with the focus being on the myth, as the terminology shows. By doing so, on the one hand, rituals are reduced to their plot and their performing aspects appear to be secondary. On the other hand, this also leads to those myths and texts that do not bear any indications of ritual acting such as the Ba‘al-Cycle or the Aqhat Epic being labeled as ritual dramas.<sup>17</sup> This term stresses the plot and hence the literature and loses sight of the oral, performing character of rituals.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting the plot as the crucial aspect is due to a modern understanding of Greek *theater*, in which myths played a central role. By using terms like “cultic drama,” these implications are conveyed and imposed on phenomena that neither should nor can be described in this anachronistic way. The property, heterogeneity, and otherness of ancient events – and even of Greek tragedy and comedy – are wiped out in behalf of

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<sup>12</sup> See among others KERTSCHER/MERSCH 2003, 7–10. Cf. FISCHER-LICHTE 2016, 37–44 and KOTTE 2013, 146–55.

<sup>13</sup> This creates the problem that, if everything is a performance, nothing is a performance.

<sup>14</sup> This is preferred, because the other term, *theatrical*, bears indeed a negative connotation meaning something like affected, assumed or showy. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *theatrical*.

<sup>15</sup> This includes the whole phenomenon and is not to be reduced to the literary dimension of drama.

<sup>16</sup> NIELSEN 2002, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. NIELSEN 2002, 39–46.

<sup>18</sup> Beside ritual dramas, Nielsen (2002, 16) names cultic theaters, which is defined as “a purely religious structure, situated in a sanctuary and intended for the accommodation of worshippers at cultic ceremonies.” Coming from an archaeological background, this seems to be obvious. Nevertheless, again, her understanding of scenic or performing actions are affected by a European idea of *theater*. By assuming that non-actors needed a place for watching the actions implies a spatial distinction between actors and participants that is common but inconclusive.

a homogenous, simplified, and Eurocentric way of analysis. Talking about rituals should never fall into this Eurocentric and colonial trap.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, there seems to be a common border concerning the research subjects of both categories of theater studies (performance studies respectively) and ritual studies in the analysis of the phenomena of ancient cultures. Andreas Kotte suggests looking at the relationship of ostentation and consequences for distinguishing between rituals and traditions of *theater*.<sup>20</sup> While the latter has no or only little consequences, rituals bear a high amount of positive or negative consequences from an emic perspective. This differentiation recalls the distinction of *illusion and reality*, which is often associated with the poles of *theater* and ritual.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, speaking about consequences bears no appraisal of either aspect in terms of pretense and authenticity. Both have in common a high amount of ostentation and include performing actions. Therefore, questions on how to analyze rituals and the traditions of *theater* can cross-fertilize. In many research projects, this is already apparent, though not as much as possible in Biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies. By taking this threshold seriously, aspects of ancient rituals become visible, which might be overlooked if the analysis is reduced to the official's actions and categories such as time, space, narration, participants, and so on, as is the case in many studies. It leads to a closer look at the corporality, the ostentation, the event, and the representation of ancient rituals. In the following, the Babylonian Akītu-procession will be described through the lens of these four categories. As a result, the Akītu-procession can be seen as a medium of commu-

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<sup>19</sup> There have also been suggestions of the Akītu-procession as some form of a cultic drama, though they are found mainly in older academic literature. In most cases, the thesis is based on the texts KAR 143 (the so-called Marduk-ordeal: LIVINGSTONE 1989, 82–86 [no. 34]) and K 3476 (ibid., 92–95 [no. 37]), although both texts are very difficult to understand in both language and content. One important exponent of this theory was Pallis, who combined the Mesopotamian Akītu-festival with Egyptian, Indian, and especially Greek traditions as well as with some thoughts about the Native American culture he calls primitive. See PALLIS 1926, 149–306. With this, he was not able to see the distinct characteristics and aspects of the Akītu-procession and interpreted it from a Western point of view.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. KOTTE 2012, 15–60. Kotte, who is a scholar in theater studies, tries to find a definition, which is less conventional and narrow. He postulates that *theater*, resp. scenic processes, is a question of relation between ostentation or highlighting and consequence. As a basis, he chooses the holistic play of children or animals in which reality and play coincides. From this phenomenon, he analyzes variations of highlighting and consequences. The more an action is presented ostentatiously and the less it has any consequences on the participants, the more it can be called a scenic process. The conservative, European tradition with its darkened room fulfills both criteria. The actors on an illuminated stage are highlighted and there are no serious ramifications, neither for the actors nor the spectators. By taking these criteria as the both axes of a chart, one sees two extremes and many coordinates in between. The two extremes are: 1) the painting or picture, which leads to an ossification of the processes without any form of real sequels and 2) death as the ultimate consequence without any form of play. Between these extreme poles, there are many varieties of combinations and gradations of ostentation and consequences, and this relationship helps to analyze human processes and actions. On this chart appear many contemporary as well as historical rituals. Furthermore, this idea implies that the decision of naming a phenomenon *theater* or scenic depends on the particular context and perspective, for example, an emic or etic one.

<sup>21</sup> See for example RAO/KÖPPING 2008, 11–18.

nication of knowledge between all participants (not only the officials), and this will lead to a brief examination of the Greek tragedy as both cases deal with a procession as a critical public action for its particular culture in antiquity.

### A Short Description of the Akītu-Festival and its Procession

The Akītu-procession was part of an eleven-day urban festival of the same name in the ancient Near East and took place twice during these days.<sup>22</sup> Because the Akītu-festival had a long and multi-variant tradition in Mesopotamian culture, the focus must be confined to a specific time and space, which in this context is first millennium Babylon. Unfortunately, the extant sources for the Akītu-festival in Babylon of the era are rather meager. Therefore, it is necessary to collect all available sources and attestations of the festival of the first millennium B.C.E. in the ancient Near East. Some of the sources come from other Mesopotamian regions such as Uruk and Assyrian cities as well as from different epochs, including the Hellenistic period, which differ from the eras of the ancient Near Eastern empires. Altogether, one must accept the sources' varying regions, ages, and genres.<sup>23</sup> Due to the high stability and loyalty of ancient cultic rites in this area, one can, with due care, use these sources to expand the picture of the Babylonian Akītu-procession.<sup>24</sup>

The Akītu-festival for Marduk in Babylon was celebrated twice a year: once on the first days of the month Nisannu<sup>25</sup> and then again at the beginning of the month of Tašrītu.<sup>26</sup> As the one Akītu-festival is in spring and the other in autumn, both dates range around the equinoxes and reference two prominent times of the year. Both festivals differ in the rites until the 7<sup>th</sup> day; the spring Akītu-festival has a stronger connection to the myth of the so-called battle of chaos, which finds its Babylonian expression in the mythic conflict of Marduk and Tiāmtu (Tiamat) as told in *Enūma eliš*, the Babylonian Creation Epic.<sup>27</sup> Beginning on the 8<sup>th</sup> day and especially concerning the proces-

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<sup>22</sup> For descriptions and interpretations of the whole festival (including the procession) see, e.g., VAN DER TOORN 1991, 331–44; COHEN 1993, 400–53; PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994 with reviews by GEORGE 1996 and LAMBERT 1997; BIDMEAD 2002. For Hellenistic Akītu-Festival, see LINSSEN 2004, 71–86. For Assyrian Akītu-Festival, ZGOLL 2006 and PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 2015, 416–26. For the aspects of visibility and invisibility in the context of the Akītu-Festival see ZGOLL 2007.

<sup>23</sup> These are, for example, ritual texts, royal inscriptions, cultic commentaries, chronicles, letters, myths and epics, omens, and others. For an overview of important sources, see ZGOLL 2006, 72–75.

<sup>24</sup> This is an accepted procedure and is based in the thesis that ancient Near Eastern rituals have a high amount of stability during hundreds (and thousands) of years. In this case, texts from the Hellenistic period contain reliable information on former cultic practices; the same applies to a Middle-Assyrian text. Cf., e.g., ZGOLL 2006, 14–16.

<sup>25</sup> The first month in the Babylonian calendar, corresponding to March–April in our calendar.

<sup>26</sup> The seventh month in the Babylonian calendar, corresponding to September–October in our calendar.

<sup>27</sup> The rites of the autumn Akītu-Festival, which were held primarily outside the city, dealt with the role of the king and a reconciliation with his gods. For a reconstruction of the rites see AMBOS 2013.

sion, they are similar to each other, and, therefore, the sources that describe the Tašrītu-Akītu can also be used to shed light on the rites in Nisannu.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in the following, the focus is on the spring Akītu-festival in Nisannu. It focused on the elevated role of kingship, both Marduk's role as king of the gods and the role of the human king. In Babylon, the kingship of Marduk was celebrated by recalling the primeval events as recounted in *Enūma eliš*.<sup>29</sup> This can be understood as the background-myth for the festival: Marduk's victory over Tiāmtu, his enthronement as king over the gods, and his creation of the known earth with Babylon and his temple Esagila as its center. Through this celebration, the sovereignty of the human king in Babylon as well as the political role of the city was consolidated.

*Tabel 1: Selected main actions during the spring Akītu-Festival*

day	important actions	status
1–7	· preparing rites for the day	non-public
5	· arrival of Nabû from Borsippa with a feast in the evening at the Uraš-Gate	public
8	· rites of the king	non-public
	· beginning of the procession: from Esagila (assembly of the gods; decreeing of destinies) up to KÁ.SIKIL.LA	non-public
	· ritual of <i>harû</i> at KÁ.SIKIL.LA	semi-public
	· procession from KÁ.SIKIL.LA via Ay-ṭbur-šabû-street and Ištar-lamassi-ummānīša-street up to the Ištar-Gate by chariot and by foot; by boat to the Akītu-house	public
8–10	· stay in the Akītu-house	non-public
11	· return: from the Akītu-house to Esagila (same route)	public
	· decreeing of destinies in Esagila	non-public
12	· resting	non-public
	· return of the guests	probably public

As the focus is on the performing aspects, the public actions, particularly the two processions, are important. The acts of the first seven days were primarily non-public rites, except the arrival of Marduks's son Nabû<sup>30</sup> from Borsippa on the fifth day and the feast at the Uraš-Gate, the southern city-gate of Babylon. This was celebrated in the evening by all humans, with the slaughtering of animals, fumigation, and torches for illuminating the darkness.<sup>31</sup> The other rites of the first days took place inside the tem-

<sup>28</sup> This is indicated by ABL 956 (see PARPOLA 1993, no. 253) and AO 6459 Obv. 14f. (see LINSSEN 2004, 185, 188).

<sup>29</sup> See KÄMMERER/METZLER 2012; LAMBERT 2013.

<sup>30</sup> For Marduk, see OSHIMA 2007, 348–60; GRONEBERG 2004, 86–108. For Nabû, see POMPONIO 1978; GRONEBERG 2004, 118–30.

<sup>31</sup> See VAT 13834+14038 in PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994, 244–46 [no. 13].

ple and dealt with its cleansing and purification as well as the role of the king.<sup>32</sup> On day eight, Marduk and his divine guests, the cult images of other gods, went out of the temple and walked in procession through Babylon towards the Ištar-Gate, located at the northern part of the city of Babylon. Therefore, they probably left the temple area through the KÁ.SIKIL.LA, the eastern gate of the temple Esagila, where the king had to present the *harû*-ritual.<sup>33</sup> Afterwards, the procession took the route via the streets Ay-Ībur-šabû and Ištar-lamassi-ummānīša, which lead to the north of the city.<sup>34</sup> Thanks to a Neo-Assyrian description of the procession<sup>35</sup> as well as to some omens,<sup>36</sup> we know that the statues were transported by horse-chariots and by foot. At several stations such as the street or at the river, the procession stopped and cultic texts were recited. The group of gods and humans passed through the Ištar-Gate and went on a ship<sup>37</sup> to reach the Akītu-house. In Babylon, this cannot be located with certainty, but it was probably not far away from the northern city wall.<sup>38</sup> They spent some days in the Akītu-house and returned to the city on the 11<sup>th</sup> day, taking the same route as before.<sup>39</sup> The procession came to a close with Marduk ascending his seat in the temple Esagila and all the divine guests going home. The procession itself was a public ritual and, as some letters show, it was possible for non-officials to join it.<sup>40</sup> It is obvious from various sources that the Akītu-Festival, including the procession, was a time of joy and happiness.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The actions of the first days are mainly reconstructed by the Hellenistic text *Racc.* 127ff. (see LINSSEN 2004, 215–37). They include among others the production and destruction of two wooden figurines on the 3<sup>rd</sup> resp. 6<sup>th</sup> day, a recitation of the whole seven tablets (!) *Enūma eliš* on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, the ritual cleaning of the temple and the king's so-called negative confession and humiliation on the 5<sup>th</sup> day as well as the preparation of the cult images for the procession on the 7<sup>th</sup> day. On day 8, the procession started inside the temple, and with every station, it entered more and more the public sphere.

<sup>33</sup> For the ritual see ZGOLL 2006, 34–37. Because the actions take place before as well as inside Esagila, the rite is understood as semi-public.

<sup>34</sup> For a description of the Babylonian topography see GEORGE 1992.

<sup>35</sup> See K 1356 in PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994, 207–209 [no. 2], which is a description of an image that was created and placed on a bronze door of the Neo-Assyrian Akītu-house by Sennacherib showing Aššur's going to war against Tīāmtu.

<sup>36</sup> See the processional omens, PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994, 262 and 265 [no. 8], lines 90–93.

<sup>37</sup> In Assyria, no boat is attested. VAT 16435 is a Middle-Assyrian text referring to Babylon.

<sup>38</sup> There has not been any distinct identification of the Babylonian Akītu-house yet, as the attempts are not convincing. See, e.g., SCHMIDT 2002 and KOSE 2004. The Neo-Assyrian Akītu-house was located outside the inner city, but was still in the agricultural belt, although it was (symbolically) named *bīt akīt šēri*, which means “Akītu-house of the steppe” and associates the house with the realm of chaos. See PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 2015, 420.

<sup>39</sup> This is shown by PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994, 41; 221–27 [no. 7], I 9. Cf., also, ZGOLL 2006, 40. AO 6465 from Seleucid Uruk steers in this direction, cf. ZGOLL *ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, ABL 842 (PARPOLA 1987, no. 131), ABL 971 (COLE/MACHINIST 1998, no. 60), and YOS 3,9 (KIENAST 1998, 24f. no 17) whereas the latter refers to another procession in the month of Adarru.

<sup>41</sup> This is testified among others by GE III 31–34 (see GEORGE 1999, 24); BM 121006+127889 VI 6–11 (THOMPSON 1931, 36); K 9876+ 12f. (PONGRATZ-LEISTEN 1994, 228–32 [no. 8]) and by an

## Corporality, Multi-sensual Ostentation, Event, and Representation

Looking at the already named categories of corporality, multi-sensual ostentation, event, and representation brings more information about the public part of the procession into view. At first, some thoughts on corporality, ostentation, and the event are presented. Afterward, the focus will be on the aspect of representation, asking whether there might be some form of communication and knowledge transfer.

For all rituals, *corporality* is a fundamental aspect and, in this context, there are two key facts. First, without physical and sensual perception, there is no ritual. In the public procession, there are many visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile stimuli. Secondly, the co-presence of all participants is of high relevance and appears as an indispensable presupposition for ostentation, event, and representation. Co-presence is not reduced to the main actors such as the gods, the king, or the priests but also refers to the audience and bystanders. Both groups, actors and spectators, are mutually dependent and bring each other into being. However, they are not static. If laypeople walk behind the procession, they become actors. Those who walk in the procession can also become spectators, as they observe the bystanders. Nevertheless, social order becomes a bodily experience. However, to distinguish between actors and spectators, professionals and non-professionals respectively, does not include an allocation of activity or inactivity, because only the entirety of all present participants brings the procession into being. Although persons such as the king, the priests, and members of the cultic personnel were more engaged in the organization and practical application of the ritual than others, all participants are responsible for the success of the unique procession. Consequently, there is a high amount of contingency and unavailability as well as the danger of failure.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to co-presence, there are moments of stressed corporality in the procession such as – from an emic perspective – the cult images as the bodies of the gods, clothed in special dresses.<sup>43</sup> There are omens showing that the appearance of the divine images was observed in detail and understood as a sign of the future of the land. Furthermore, there are prescribed physical actions of the functionaries, which led the attention to the body as, for example, the taking of Marduk's hand as the starting signal of the procession.

The second category is *ostentation*. It is beyond debate that processions in general have a high order of ostentation, and this specifically applies to the Akītu-procession. Herein, a distinction of actors and spectators is found, which is manifested locally, gesturally, aurally, and with material attributes.<sup>44</sup> Concerning space, this is indicated by walking the embellished route through Babylon and the use of the decorated chari-

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inscription of Nebuchadnezzar (VAB 4, no. 29 5f.: LANGDON 1912, 196f). See also ZGOLL 2006, 12–13.

<sup>42</sup> That the cultic personal was aware of this general danger can easily be seen by the processional omens as well as by ritual texts recited at the procession stations.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, SBH VIII (VAT 663, see COHEN 1993, 449). For a description of the Mesopotamian cult images see BERLEJUNG 1998.

<sup>44</sup> KOTTE 2012, 21–31.

ots and boats as well as other aspects. Therefore, the public street appears to be the most important exposed site of the ritual, which was, together with the ship, renovated and decorated by the Neo-Babylonian kings Nabopolassar (626–605) and Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562) to amaze the citizens of the city.<sup>45</sup> The design of the Ištar-Gate still visualizes the impressiveness of this royal implementation. Ostentation via gestures are, for example, the king's hand-taking of Marduk as well as the actions of the cultic actors called *kurgarrû*,<sup>46</sup> who seems to have “played a battle” (*tūšāri mēlulu*).<sup>47</sup> Maybe, this was a form of a dance with drumbeats and shouts associated with happiness.<sup>48</sup> This is already a part of the aural ostentation, and alongside the drums, music is often mentioned by the texts. For Gilgamesh, joyful music (*nigûtu*) and the sound of the *alû*-drums are the typical elements of the Akītu-festival.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, there were many prayers and chants sung by other actors, called *assinnu* at different stations of the procession.<sup>50</sup> Fumigation also generated olfactory ostentation and made the sacred space become a more sensual and bodily experience. Finally, there were ostentations through the use of cultic objects such as standards, symbols, sacrifices, and means of carriage like the embellished chariots and boats. From the etic perspective, the cult images can also be named here. Moreover, the ostentation is exalted by the stressed bodies of the officials as well as, from an emic perspective, the cult images as bodies of the gods.

The third aspect concerns the question of whether the procession might have been an *event* for the participants, no matter if they were officials or non-officials. The main characteristic of an event is its distinctive and non-reproducible presence. An event can be planned but is not calculable. Within its uniqueness, it is experienced in one single moment, and it is not possible to repeat an event.<sup>51</sup> Because there are no clear or detailed ancient testimonies about individual experiences of the procession, one can only speak of possibilities and evidence and, in reference to the Akītu-procession, there seem to be many of them. Due to its uniqueness as a result of the communion of all participants and the location of the procession outside of the everyday routine at a special time in the year with the included possibility for having a “meet and greet” with the gods, there is a fertile breeding ground for an event. However, if the procession ever became an event for anyone lies out of the possibilities of research. There-

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<sup>45</sup> This is known by the inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar, for example, by those from Wadi Brisa (see DA RIVA 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. PELED 2015.

<sup>47</sup> See K 3476, 29'.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. CAD M/2, 16–17 s.v. *mēlulu*.

<sup>49</sup> See GE III 31–34 (GEORGE 1999, 24).

<sup>50</sup> See K 9876+19534. In another context, *assinnu* and *kurgarrû* are linked to some form of gender transformation concerning the cult of Ištar (see below), which also might lead to the realm of ostentation.

<sup>51</sup> Concerning the idea of an event, cf. MERSCH 2002; IDEM 1997, 20–37; see also FILITZ 2018.

fore, the idea of the Akītu-procession as an event remains in the area of hypotheticals.<sup>52</sup>

The time and space of the Akītu lead the festival out of the realm of everyday life into a sphere of holiness and offer some assumptions about an event. This includes the fixed date of the Akītu-Festival at the beginning of the year and the special stations of the procession between Esagila and the Akītu-house. In addition, it was possible to see and walk with the gods, which are normally hidden behind the temple walls. The gods come to the people and come into sight. In this way, the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the cosmos were intersected in the middle of the city, and this became a physical experience by walking with the gods. As this did not take place secretly but on the public street attended by the Babylonians and their guests, this convergence could be experienced by everyone. For a short time, there was the possibility to be part of this theophany. Furthermore, one could see important persons such as the king. The clothing and visible corporality of the gods and the elites stressed their status, especially above laypeople. Moreover, one could catch a glimpse of the future of the land by observing the statues, as the omens show. The atmosphere with odors, music, actions, and happiness as well as the physical and material ostentation and especially the decorated means of transportation might have made the procession a special and unique experience. At least, the rites evoking the recreation of the cosmic order lie beyond the realm of everyday life.

Although it is not likely that the ritual was interpreted as an event by the ancient participants, there are many aspects of the Akītu-Festival which center the ostentation and the singularity of the procession. From a modern perspective, this can serve as fertile breeding ground for an event.

The last of the named categories is *representation*. This refers not only to substitution but, in this context, to the realization of an ideal value or condition, in the case of the Akītu-Festival, the realization of order. The value is said to be absent but becomes simultaneously present. According to this, representation during the Akītu-procession appears in four forms of order: cosmic, religious, political, and social.

In this context, *Enūma eliš*, the Babylonian Creation Epic, as the narrative behind the Akītu-Festival is very important. The myth is not only about Marduk gaining victory over his chaotic enemy Tiāmtu but also about him becoming king over the other gods and creating the whole cosmos with Babylon and Marduk's temple Esagila in and as its center.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the *cosmic* order, which is established in the myth and revolves around Marduk's dominion, is reinstated every year by the festival's rites.

The myth of Marduk's status as divine king and his residence in the concrete Babylonian temple Esagila focus on his supreme position in the pantheon, thus referring to the *religious* order. Marduk, vanquisher of Tiāmtu and creator of the cosmos, is the

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<sup>52</sup> The perspective of the event helps to focus more on the experiences of all participants; usually, the description of the Akītu-procession is reduced to the officials and misses the (also literal) standpoint of the bystanders and spectators, as if they were not of vital significance of the ritual.

<sup>53</sup> *Enūma eliš* appears as one of many and different versions of the so-called battle of chaos or *Chaoskampf* (available in written form), which thematize the divine kingship and the way of its presence in the cosmos.

main god and the divine king, and, as a result, his cultic adoration, including his priesthood in Esagila, is of high importance. The latter enables the maintenance and carrying out of the rites every year.

Along with the consolidation of Marduk's reign over the gods is the confirmation of the king's sovereignty over Babylon, and this implies the *political* order. Due to many rites dealing with the role of the king and his legitimation by Marduk, the political system of Babylonian monarchy as well as the positive valuation of urbanity is sanctioned. Furthermore, the cosmic order with its idea of space leads to the political realm, because Babylon is presented as the center of the world and the center of the south Mesopotamian cities. This can easily be seen by the fact that people and deities from other regions such as Borsippa came to the city as guests during the period of the Akītu-Festival.

Besides this cosmic, religious, and political order, the Akītu-procession creates *social* structure. Those coming together and praising Marduk at the beginning of the year form a social group. They are connected with the collective past through ritual and tradition and bond together as a society for the following year. As citizens of Babylon celebrated together with persons from neighboring cities, the social group for the procession, and thus the social structure, was not limited to Babylon. Of course, this order includes the low position of the non-professionals alongside and in contrast to Marduk, the king, and the official priests. Moreover, orders of gender are sanctioned as the cult images go out in pairs of divine husband and wife, supporting this idea of social co-existence.<sup>54</sup>

In summary, the representation during the Akītu-Festival focuses on the order concerning religion, cosmos, politics, and society. The procession does not appear as an academic discourse but as a public and visual exposition of power and order and at the same time as its creation and re-creation. Pongratz-Leisten (1994, 5) identified the procession as "Popularisierung von Theologie" (popularization of theology). At the same moment, by becoming a part of the procession, the order was physically experienced by all participants. Within the ritual, a new reality is created, which enables safe and secured life until the next Akītu-festival.

### The Akītu-Procession as a Medium of Communication

Within the Akītu-procession, there seems to be verbal and non-verbal communication of knowledge that is oriented toward everyday life. This knowledge concerns all four aspects of representation and comes out as an immanent and physical experience of order during the public procession. While the *assinnu*, as one important cultic actor, proclaims at the processional station of the river that the nations are on their knees

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<sup>54</sup> However, walking in procession as a divine couple is not attested for every Akītu-festival. For example, in Uruk, a procession is known in which gods and goddesses walked separately (see KAR 132: LINSSEN 2004, 201–208). However, this also presents social order, namely the one of biological sex.

because of Bēl's (Marduks's) setting forth,<sup>55</sup> all human participants kiss the ground at Nabū's "welcome evening" on the 5<sup>th</sup> day and experience the hierarchy in a physical way.<sup>56</sup> With these values, it provides and legitimates certain protocols for everyday actions, namely that people live and act in accordance with the communicated systems of order.<sup>57</sup> The correctly performed ritual recalls and recreates the cosmic order so that its continued existence is guaranteed. The focus on Babylon and specifically on Marduk's temple communicates that the participants are inside the world's center and this stabilizes the political status of Babylon. It also includes the political system of monarchy in that the human kingship is consolidated during the Akītu-festival and its procession. Furthermore, the importance of Marduk and his priesthood is communicated as a fundamental condition for the existing cosmos and its order and thus of the life of any given individual. The latter is constituted in the concrete urban society of ancient Babylon with its hierarchies concerning family, profession, origin, gender, status, etc. These values of politics, religion, and society are presented and represented, created and re-created, but there is no space for the discussion of the values. From the officials' and professionals' point of view, these given values are fixed, and they form the reliability of the tangible order. They are legitimated by the responsible institution, which postulates that the values date back to primeval times and therefore appear as indispensable for the participant's regular life. This knowledge transfer grants the citizens of Babylon an orientation point and a stable framework in which they can lead their lives for the next year until the next Akītu-festival. From a perspective of function, the Akītu-procession uses aspects of corporality, ostentation, event, and representation to install, communicate, and stabilize these values.

#### *Excurses: Mesopotamian Akītu-Festival and Greek Tragedy*

By this example, a difference in the Mesopotamian and Greek traditions becomes visible, leading back to the question of performing and theatric traditions in a European setting. In ancient Athens, the political idea of democracy enables the current discussion of questions about the *polis* in a public assembly of all citizens.<sup>58</sup> This can also be found in one aspect of the Great Dionysia, known to us up from the fifth century B.C.E. as tragedy, satyr play, and comedy. These theatric forms were joint projects of the Attic *polis*, in which, for example, a leader of the choir called χορηγός paid the ordinary citizens who constituted the important chorus. By using mythical or historical motifs of the collective memory, tragedy opened a space for communication within and regarding the *polis*, about political topics and the meaning of Attic democracy.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, "it is no coincidence that democracy and tragedy were born at the same

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<sup>55</sup> K 9876+19534, 7.

<sup>56</sup> VAT 13834+14038, 16'. Although this was not part of the Akītu-procession, it is similar to it due to its public character and the belonging to the whole Akītu-Festival. It is likely that similar actions took place during the walk from Esagila to the Akītu-house resp. on the return.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. DÜCKER 2007, 51 and 57: Values in general can be seen in contexts of acting.

<sup>58</sup> Of course, one must keep in mind that the status of being an Attic citizen was reduced to free men.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. WILES 2000, 48–65; GOLDHILL 2000, 60–88.

historical moment.”<sup>60</sup> These theatric forms had their sociological setting in the Attic festival for the god of ambiguity, Dionysus. The Great Dionysia began with the transport of the cult image of Dionysus to the city and a great procession to his altar accompanied by some cultic hymns. These hymns are the *dithyrambs*, which are said to be one root of tragedy, and it is interesting that a public procession provides their ritual background.<sup>61</sup> On the following day, the competitions of tragedies and satyr plays began. Even though only a few of the stories enacted in these plays are known, it is recognized that they dealt with important aspects of Greek life and culture. Here, one can see a negotiation of the common values and ideals with the involvement of all citizens. Greek theatric traditions appear as “a fundamental factor in the politicization of the Athenian citizen, in putting political reflection in the public domain”<sup>62</sup> which includes an educational dimension.

Although, in Babylonia, there was also the participation of a large group of officials and non-officials in the public ritual, fixed values and systems of order were communicated without any form of argumentation by the citizens. This aspect seems to depend on the political system of monarchy. This appears as one reason why there is no form of ritual in ancient Mesopotamia that is close to the Greek institutional theatric traditions.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, both have a high amount of corporality, ostentation, and representation and may bear the possibility for an event. Additionally, the Mesopotamian Akītu-Festival as a ritual and Greek tragedy differ concerning the consequences. While the fundamental order of life is secured for the next year during the Akītu-Festival, Greek tragedy has less fundamental and unmediated ramifications on the *polis*.

## Conclusion

It has been shown that there are aspects of corporality, multi-sensual ostentation, event, and representation that make the public parts of the Mesopotamian Akītu-procession come close to the threshold of ritual and theatric forms. Different from the ancient Attic tradition, there is no public discussion on these values but rather an installation of givens concerning cosmic, political, religious, and social order. The public rites during the procession are not only a recollection of these values but a re-creation and

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<sup>60</sup> WILES 2000, 48.

<sup>61</sup> For the ambiguity of the question of origin, see KOTTE 2013, 33–43. See also IDEM 2012, 220–26.

<sup>62</sup> GOLDHILL 2000, 65. He claims the aspect of teaching to be the reason for Plato to ban *theater* from his ideal *polis*, while preferring philosophy as privileged medium of knowledge transfer.

<sup>63</sup> This applies to the genuine Mesopotamian rituals and traditions. With the triumph of Hellenism, Babylon also got a theater-building, which had different construction phases until into Parthian Period. It is likely that the term *bīt tamaratu* (É IGI.DU<sub>8</sub>.MEŠ), attested in the astronomical diaries, may refer to it, the more so as it appears to be a rendering of the Greek *theatron* as it can be translated as “house of observation”. The building seems to be linked to the Greek (not Babylonian) inhabitants of Babylon and was used for political announcements as well as other uses. Cf. VAN DER SPEK 2001, 445–56 and POTTS 2011, 239–51.

hence a stabilization of the urban system. Thus, a knowledge transfer as well as an internalization of the various systems of order take place. This does not happen only as an intellectual activity but is also a sensual and physical experience. It enables the citizens of Babylon to continue their lives within the familiar structures. In this way, one may speak of “teaching morality” in the public Akītu-procession, as it taught the Babylonians to respect the given systems of order. From a political point of view, this reduces the risk of uprisings. However, due to the character of rituals, the hazard of change can never be eliminated totally. There is always the possibility that rituals cannot re-create order at all but rather lead to a destruction of it.

How then should we deal with the use of *theater*-terms for analyzing rituals such as the Akītu-procession? Perhaps it is better to utilize them with caution due to their modern, Eurocentric, and colonial implications. This specifically applies to terms like “stage,” “role,” and “drama.” But this should not prevent the use of the categories of theater or performance studies, which draw attention to the high amount of ostentation even in Ancient Studies. Although there is no ancient Near Eastern phenomenon like the institutional Greek form of tragedy and although there is no adequate name for it in the particular languages, this does not prevent the examination of similarities as seen, for example, in the processes of ostentation.<sup>64</sup> Although the situation of extant sources regarding ancient Near Eastern and Israelite or Judean rituals are meager, there are hints about their performing and characteristics of ostentation for officials and non-officials in concrete rituals and rites. Well-known examples for the possibility of using actions associated with ostentation and even transformation in Mesopotamia are the cultic actors *assinnu* and *kurgarrû*, who are linked to Eanna and the cult of Ištar by the poem of Erra and Išum<sup>65</sup> and whose genders are said to be transformed by the goddess herself.<sup>66</sup> It also seems to be important to focus not only on the officials and professionals but much more so on the non-official and non-professional participants who play a conspicuous role in creating rituals like the Akītu-procession.<sup>67</sup> By making use of these categories and by looking at the processes behind the terms, the description of a particular phenomenon will gain new dimensions and ancient events will become more vibrant.

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. KOTTE 2014, 56.

<sup>65</sup> See FOSTER 2005, 880–911.

<sup>66</sup> Erra-Epic, IV 52–59. At the end, it is not clear whose gender is altered: the *assinnu*'s only or those of both. For an interpretation of this passage preferring a transformation only of the *assinnu* see PELED 2014, 288–96. It can be seen that Inanna/Ištar is ascribed to have powers in preserving and destroying the world order, manifested among others in the capability to alter genders. See further MAUL 1992; BEUGER 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Of course, the source situation causes difficulties; nevertheless, by taking into account more seriously texts such as letters, the non-professionals can be looked at in another light.

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