

RELIGION AND POWER: DIVINE KINGSHIP IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA AND BEYOND

Nicole Brisch

The topic of the Third Annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar, held on February 23–24, 2007, was divine kingship in ancient Mesopotamia and other areas of the world, where the phenomenon of living kings that are venerated as gods, is attested. The study of kingship goes back to the roots of fields such as anthropology and religious studies (Frazer's *The Golden Bough*) or Assyriology and Near Eastern archaeology (Frankfort 1948; Labat 1939). More recently, several conferences have been held on kingship in a cross-cultural perspective (Cannadine and Price 1987; Gundlach and Weber 1992; Quigley 2005; Erkens 2002). Yet the question of the divinity of the king — the king as god — had never been examined before in a cross-cultural and

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multi-disciplinary perspective. Moreover, while ancient Egyptian kingship has been studied time and again (for example, O'Connor and Silverman 1995; Gundlach and Weber 1992; Gundlach and Klug 2004), Mesopotamian kingship is often neglected in cross-cultural comparisons, even though ancient Mesopotamian kings also deified themselves, at least for a brief period of time.

The last over-arching study of kingship and religion in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia is Henri Frankfort's famous *Kingship and the Gods* (1948), a seminal study comparing the different concepts of kingship in these areas. Frankfort, who was the Oriental Institute's Field Director in Iraq, already doubted the validity of Frazer's ideas on divine kingship. However, since his study much more material has come to light, which forces us to re-evaluate some of his assessments.

While Frazer's study has received strong criticism within anthropology and religious studies, his theories on kingship in various African nations has more recently experienced a revival in anthropological and Africanist literature (especially various contributions in Quigley 2005). Frazer's model of divine kingship, however, severely limits our understanding of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. For example, Frazer emphasized the question of regicide as part of the ideology of the divine king, who is killed when he becomes physically feeble. However, to my knowledge, regicide for ideological or religious reasons is unattested in these ancient societies. Frankfort therefore concluded that there was no divine kingship in ancient Mesopotamia.

One of the goals of this seminar was therefore to bring ancient Mesopotamia to the forefront of a discourse on kingship and to begin developing a new framework for the study of kingship in general, and divine kingship in particular, by moving beyond Frazer's models of thought that, positively or negatively, have influenced studies on kingship for the past century or so.

Seminar participants came from the fields of Assyriology (Gebhard Selz, University of Vienna; Piotr Michalowski, University of Michigan), Egyptology (Paul Frandsen, Copenhagen University), art history (Irene Winter, Harvard University; Erica Ehrenberg, New York Academy of Arts), Near Eastern Archaeology (Clemens Reichel, Oriental Institute; Reinhard Bernbeck, Binghamton University), Mayan Archaeology (David Freidel, Southern Methodist University), African Studies (Michelle Gilbert, Sarah Lawrence College), Chinese Studies (Michael Puett, Harvard University), Religious Studies (Bruce Lincoln, University of Chicago), and Roman Archaeology (Greg Woolf, St. Andrews University). Jerrold Cooper (Johns Hopkins University) and Kathy Morrison (University of Chicago) graciously served as respondents for the conference.

The seminar was divided into three sessions. The first, chaired by Emily Teeter of the Oriental Institute, focused on ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. The participants in this session all approached the topic differently. Gebhard Selz concentrated on religious aspects relating to the divine king by questioning and thereby proposing to revise our notions of the divine. Michalowski proposed a historical approach, showing that the phenomenon of kings declaring themselves divine is, at least in Mesopotamia, embedded in specific historical circumstances that made self-divinization a very instable form of government that was soon abandoned. Paul Frandsen chose a linguistic approach, in which he focused on the notion of fear of the king in ancient Egypt. His study aimed at clarifying whether the ancient Egyptians considered the pharaoh to be truly divine or human. This aura of fear can perhaps in some ways be compared to the ancient Mesopotamian concept of the divine or royal "aura," which is both fear and awe inspiring.

The second session, chaired by the Oriental Institute's Theo van den Hout, was entitled "Iconography and Anthropology of Divine Kingship." Irene Winter and Erica Ehrenberg both spoke on figurative representations of kings. Winter pointed out that divine kings appear in figural representations as deities of lower rank and suggested to not only consider representations of kings as divine, but also of gods as kings. Ehrenberg, who discussed Late Babylonian and Achaemenid

kings in art, showed that the king, even though not explicitly divine, was still considered to be at the center of the cosmos. Michelle Gilbert, whose long-standing work in Ghana has given her deep insights into royal rituals of the divine Akwapim kings, illustrated fascinating beliefs and rituals associated with the cult of kings, and discussed the notion of regicide as well as the question of whether it is the king or kingship that is divine (following Evans-Pritchard's footsteps). This insight into royal rituals is especially interesting for Mesopotamianists who often do not have detailed information on such rites. David Freidel explained his theories on Maya divine kingship and especially emphasized the embeddedness of self-divinization in religion. Freidel stresses the shamanistic nature of Maya kingship, in which the king is worshipped as a god, while the gods can only be worshipped through the king. Clemens Reichel illustrated the end of the cult of divine kings as visible in the Oriental Institute's excavations in the Diyala region of Iraq. Through his painstaking efforts in reconstructing archaeological evidence and by viewing it in its historical context as visible in the textual record, Reichel was able to elucidate the only excavated example for a temple of a divine king in Mesopotamia and the changes that happened to this temple after divine kingship was abolished there. Reinhard Bernbeck as the last speaker of the first day offered some theoretical approaches to understanding royal power and possibilities for resistance against it.

The second day of the seminar was devoted to a session on "Divine Kingship and Imperialism" under the chairmanship of Adam T. Smith of the University of Chicago. The first paper by Michael Puett illustrated concepts of kingship in ancient China. Similar to Michalowski, Puett also took a historical approach and showed that different ideologies for kingship in ancient China competed against each other, thereby leading to the introduction, abolishment, and re-introduction of divine kingship. Bruce Lincoln, who spoke on the role of religion in Achaemenid imperialism, explained the Achaemenid king's central role for order in the cosmos. While, as mentioned above, Achaemenid kings did not explicitly declare themselves divine, their role at the center of the cosmos was nevertheless of utmost importance for maintaining order and stability. The last but not least lecture of the seminar by Greg Woolf was dedicated to the cult of Roman emperors. Independently of Selz, Woolf also argued for the need to rethink our (Western) notions of the human and the divine. He gave examples of emperors that were worshipped as gods despite being reluctant to such a form of adoration, and he showed that when they were worshiped, the cults were often part of local traditions in the Roman provinces that satisfied beliefs of local peoples rather than the Roman emperors. As divine emperors usually ranked among lower gods, Woolf therefore argues for contemplating different degrees of humanity and divinity with boundaries that should be fluid rather than rigid.

As one of two respondents, Jerrold Cooper summarized salient points of the papers on the ancient Near East while focusing his criticism on Ehrenberg's theory on the symbolism of the "ring and rod" in the first-millennium Achaemenid royal imagery. The second respondent, Kathleen Morrison, discussed the remaining papers. Morrison focused on the suggestion that there may be different degrees in between the categories of human and divine, and that divine kings may occupy a position somewhere in between these two opposites. She also took up Winter's point on the need to also study the way in which gods can be viewed as kings.

The seminar brought several issues to the surface that have not been discussed heretofore. In my view, one of the most interesting points of the seminar was to see the many different ways in which the topic can be approached. The main approaches, in my view, are historical, historical-religious, historical-archaeological, anthropological, art historical, and linguistic. This proves the importance of trying to integrate as many data from as many sources as possible in furthering our understanding of this phenomenon. Some of the emerging themes are:

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- 1) The need to reconsider our notions of the human and the divine: Western notions of these categories seem to see them as a binary opposition, in which one can only occupy one *or* the other. To us, it is an anathema that a human being could be considered both, human *and* divine. But it is most likely that this was not always the case everywhere.
- 2) Divine kingship as a form of government is rather unstable and often not of long duration. Ancient Mesopotamia and China both exhibit similarities in that the ideology of the divine king only prevailed for a short period of time and was then replaced by an ideology that did not see kings as divine. In both areas, however, self-deification is re-introduced at certain times after it had been abolished. Rather than Frazer, who saw divine kingship as a more permanent form of government, it is now clear that it is rather fluid and ephemeral.
- 3) Several participants have stated that the questions that had been asked thus far may have been wrong, and that new questions have to be formulated. Gilbert, for example, proposed that the distinction between sacral and divine king should be abolished, as these are unhelpful distinctions in trying to understand kingship better. The seminar has also raised many questions for myself. For example, why did kings begin to deify themselves? What were the reasons that led to this major interference in the religious practices of that time? Why was it possible to re-introduce it after it had been abolished?

In conclusion, the two-day seminar has raised many questions, not all of which can be answered. But the emerging themes show that there still is much to be done, and it is to be hoped that this seminar will function as a stimulus for future research. The proceedings of the seminar will be published as part of the Oriental Institute Seminars (OIS) series within the next academic year (2007/2008).

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