

Introduction

Vladimir SAZONOV, Peeter ESPAK, Andreas JOHANDI

Several papers published in this volume were presented at the conference *Formative Tendencies in Near Eastern Religions and Ideologies* in Beirut, Lebanon, in April 2019. The conference was organized by the Centre for Oriental Studies of the University of Tartu and the Finnish Institute in the Middle East.

The aim of the conference was to examine some key perspectives in the development of different ancient Mesopotamian and East Mediterranean cultures in their multicultural frameworks. In earlier studies, changes in religion were often explained by the arrival of new people with new (often fresh and innovative) ideological and religious ideas, which had a huge impact on local people. This was thereafter followed by transformation of local cults under foreign influences, which resulted in the emergence of new syncretistic religions, myths, pantheons, cults, cultic calendars and beliefs (e.g., Sumero-Akkadian, Hurro-Hittite, etc.).

For example, henotheistic¹ and monotheistic² ideas and tendencies in the Ancient Near East were presented as a product of the arrival of Semitic peoples in the southern Mesopotamian region in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. This explanation is still partly valid as foreign invaders bring their religious ideas and gods with them. However, it can be shown that Mesopotamian and Eastern Mediterranean cultures were multicultural by their nature from very early times already. It is not possible to postulate a pure Sumerian versus a pure Semitic religion and oppose them to each other. Exchange of gods, ideas, myths, beliefs and religious concepts already took place long before the first written texts were created.

The conference aimed to discuss some features of the forms and formative tendencies in the mythologies and panthea in their parallel development in ancient Mesopotamia and East Mediterranean in order to understand the genealogy of different ideas and how different religious or cultural concepts interact with each other and produce new ideas. One of our main questions is whether we can actually identify the drivers of religious change. Are these drivers separate “ethnic” cultures in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, or are we simply witnessing the developments in scribal culture and organized religion and ideology? Therefore, it was intended to understand local (city) and larger developments (kingdom, league, empire) and their interconnection and suggest studying changes in religion also as a response to altered social and political circumstances.³

While not all who participated in the conference were able to turn their presentations into papers, several other colleagues who did not attend the conference presented their articles in order to contribute to the topic of studying of formative tendencies in Near Eastern religions and ideologies.

Seven papers which are presented in the current issue are studying examples and ideas from the Near Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean region from ancient Sumer in the third millennium to the Aegean world in the early first millennium BCE. Therefore, this issue presents

¹ The term “henotheism” (from Greek “heis theos” – “a god”) was introduced by the German Orientalist and philologist Max Müller (1823–1900).

² See more about monotheism in Parpola 2000.

³ Finnish Institute in the Middle East 2019.

a wide range of contributions from different areas of the Eastern Mediterranean world and from different historical periods.

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