BRILL

JOURNAL OF ANCIENT NEAR
EASTERN RELIGIONS 19 (2019) 1–2

Journal of
Ancient Near
Eastern
Religions
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Editors' Introduction

This collection of papers grew out of the Assyriological papers read at the conference “Priests and Priesthood in the Near East: Social, Intellectual and Economic Aspects” at Tel Aviv University, March 19–21, 2018 (the Hittitological papers from the conference will be included in the next volume of *Archiv für Orientforschung*). This conference was generously funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, with additional support from the Israeli Science Foundation (ISF grant no. 674/15), Tel Aviv University and Vienna University. Our thanks go to these institutions, to Yoram Cohen of Tel Aviv University for acting as a co-organizer of the conference, and to Avi Winitzer, who gave us the opportunity to place these papers in the present journal and made a crucial contribution to the editing process.

While the scope of the conference (and this volume) did not allow aiming for a comprehensive coverage of the topic of priesthood in Ancient Mesopotamia, the present volume does offer a diachronic perspective based on case studies that cumulatively cover a significant part of the available evidence.

The overall focus of these papers is on “priests in society,” and the perspective adopted might be called functionalistic, in a Geertzian and/or Durkheimian way. This is clearly a fruitful approach to Ancient Near Eastern priests, since the communitarian, community-building aspect of priestly activities—rule-bound, ritualistic and performative activities—is always present, even dominant, in the sources. Diachronic differences do not change this fundamental fact. Most importantly, the increasingly incisive demarcation of a special socio-economic niche occupied by priests as distinguished by the ownership of priestly offices, or prebends. The priesthood's relation to political power is a second dominant theme. The papers dealing with the first millennium elucidate some of the dynamics of this relationship as it evolves in response to political change. The (second and) third millennium evidence is clearer on the “deep structure” of this relationship, in which political power is dominant. Lastly, almost all contributions flesh out the centrality of the kinship group, primarily alongside the paternal line, in transmitting and managing not only the priestly offices themselves but also technical training and economic management. In this case the role of the priestly family as a socio-political unit, moreso than any

individual priest, is made apparent. We hope to have conveyed here stimulus for further discussion on the role of the priest in the ancient Near East and the ancient world in general.

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