City streets are not only traffic routes, but also places for public life and social interaction. Streets as inherently public spaces not only structure communities, in many eras they have been the primary locale for communal events: rituals, collective celebrations, executions or public upheavals. According to the present, limited state of scientific knowledge, most Mesopotamian cities (with the exception of Syro-Hittite cities and urban centres in northern Mesopotamia) do not seem to have had large open areas or special-purpose buildings serving as places for public activities, but the cities’ main roads and gates served as the most important places for these activities (see May / Steinert, *Introduction* and Natalie N. May’s contribution, both in this volume). This absence explains the multifunctional nature of city streets and gates, as this article and May’s article in this volume show.

As pointed out in this book, mental models of and discourses on urban spaces in written sources reflect the social meanings that are generated by people’s interactions and practices in the urban space and through the mapping of social and cultural values onto urban space (May / Steinert, *Introduction* and Stenger, this volume). Thus, discourses on streets in textual sources can reveal aspects of the life and the social fabric of ancient urban societies. The present contribution aims at providing an overview of how streets and their public functions are represented in cuneiform texts from the second and first millennium BCE, and which cultural and social meanings are attached to streets in different sources. How is Mesopotamian urban society reflected in written materials that concern themselves with streets? Since many similar socio-cultural meanings seem to
Various cuneiform texts from the second and first millennium BCE Mesopotamia mention city streets in connection with various activities of daily life which took place there, with the multiple functions performed by urban centres (political/administrative, judicial, religious/cultic, economic/commercial, cultural etc.), and with a complex, differentiated urban society with its heterogeneous groups of inhabitants, professions, specialists of different economic means and social standing. City streets are characterised as public space in contrast to the privacy of the house, often in terms of the opposition between “outside” versus “inside.” In descriptions of urban building projects in royal inscriptions, the public space of perspectives of an urban elite, of scribes who predominantly worked for the big institutions (palace/temple) and also were scholars, priests, omen and ritual specialists, as well as authors. Yet, many of the phenomena described can be rooted in common experiences and beliefs shared with other members and groups of their urban communities.

As Marc van de Mieroop (1997, 101ff.) noted, the social structure of Mesopotamian cities is still poorly known. Beside the nuclear family as the basic social unit, van de Mieroop (1997, 110ff.) mentions the existence of other social groups and networks based on profession (professional organisations), residence (the city-ward or neighbourhood which had its own governmental structure) and ethnic identity. Assyrian and Babylonian cities had diverse populations, many of which had ties to the palace or temples that employed numerous people and were the primary social organising forces of the cities. According to Leo Oppenheim (1977, 74ff.), Mesopotamian society was primarily based on economic status-stratification. Upper strata of urban society included office-holders in the big institutions (e.g. bureaucrats, priests, scribes) and owners of agricultural land in the countryside, which they did not cultivate themselves (but rented to tenant farmers). There were also city-dwellers who cultivated fields and orchards in the suburbs and engaged in trading/businesses (Oppenheim 1977, 86; van de Mieroop 1997, 142ff., 176ff.). The various crafts probably had a different social standing (e.g. goldsmith versus tanner). On the other hand, Oppenheim argued that ideally, all free citizens enjoyed equal status as members of the city’s or city ward’s assembly, which managed communal affairs, relations with the palace and matters between citizens (judicial conflicts, marriages, testaments, sales of property etc.); Oppenheim 1977, 95, 111f.; cf. van de Mieroop 1997, 120ff. For connections between the spatial organisation of Mesopotamian cities and social structure see also Stone 1991 and the literature discussed by May /Steinert, Introduction, this volume.

The typical Mesopotamian courtyard house was designed for privacy, turning inward and restricting contact with the outside (Guinan 1996, 61). The house omens of Šumma ālu highlight this contrast between the public sphere of the street and the private sphere of the house with omens which attach a positive value to the subordination of the private to the public: Encroachment of the house upon the boundaries of the street in the process of construction foreshadows bad luck and disharmony for the inhabitants or owners (Guinan 1996, 63f.; Freedman 1998, 90 Tablet 5: 23ff.). Other omens about the exterior appearance of houses reflect expectations of appropriate social presentation in the community: a modest, inconspicuous and uninviting façade results in happiness, well-being and protection of the household inside (Guinan 1996, 64f.; Freedman 1998, 110 Tablet 6: 1ff.).