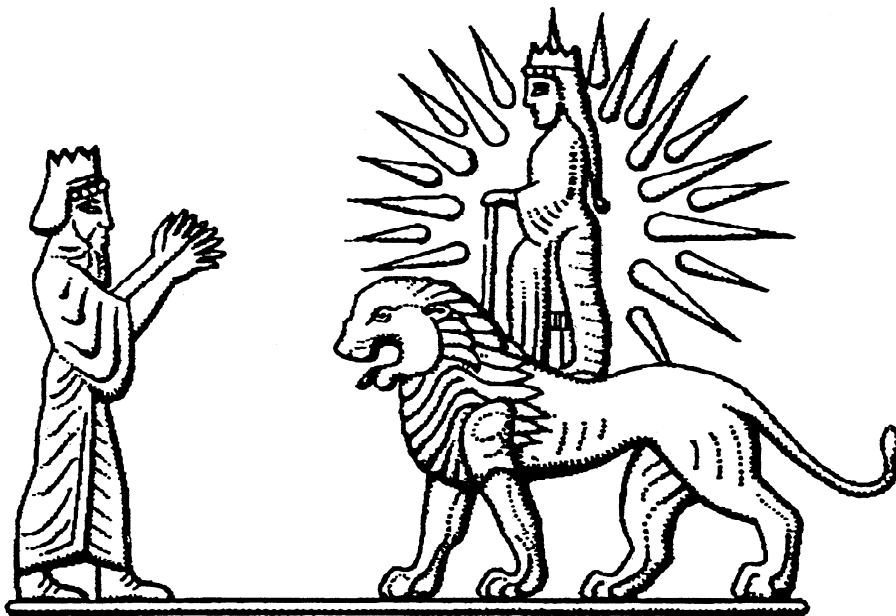


Mesopotamia in the Ancient World

Impact, Continuities, Parallels

Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium
of the Melammu Project Held in Obergurgl,
Austria, November 4–8, 2013

Edited by
Robert Rollinger and Erik van Dongen



Melammu Symposia 7

Edited by Robert Rollinger (Helsinki / Innsbruck)

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Obergurgl 2013, or A New Dawn for the Melammu Project	1
---	---

Robert Rollinger

Old Battles, New Horizons: The Ancient Near East and the Homeric Epics	5
--	---

Talking to God(s): Prayers and Incantations

Tzvi Abusch (Chair)

Introduction	35
--------------------	----

Cynthia Jean

Performing Rituals in Secluded Places: A Comparison of the Akkadian and Hittite Corpus	41
---	----

Patrick M. Michel

Worshipping Gods and Stones in Late Bronze Age Syria and Anatolia	53
---	----

Alan Lenzi

The Language of Akkadian Prayers in <i>Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi</i> and its Significance within and beyond Mesopotamia	67
--	----

David P. Wright

Ritual Speech in the Priestly-Holiness Prescriptions of the Pentateuch and its Near Eastern Context	107
--	-----

Alberto Bernabé

To Swear to Heaven and Earth, from Mesopotamia to Greece	125
--	-----

Martin Lang (Respondent)

Response	135
----------------	-----

Et Dona Ferentes: Foreign Reception of Mesopotamian Objects

D. T. Potts (Chair)

Introduction	143
--------------------	-----

Giacomo Bardelli

Near Eastern Influences in Etruria and Central Italy between the Orientalizing and the Archaic Period: The Case of Tripod-Stands and Rod Tripods	145
--	-----

Winfried Held and Deniz Kaplan	
The Residence of a Persian Satrap in Meydancikkale, Cilicia	175
Joachim Ganzert	
On the Archetype of Sacral Rulership Legitimization and the Lower Court in the Lüneburg Town Hall	193
Ann C. Gunter (Respondent)	
Response	221

‘Fighting like a Lion’: The Use of Literary Figures of Speech

Simone Paganini (Chair)	
Introduction	227
Sebastian Fink	
Metaphors for the Unrecognizability of God in Balaḡs and Xenophanes	231
Johannes Haubold	
‘Shepherds of the People’: Greek and Mesopotamian Perspectives	245
Krzysztof Ulanowski	
The Metaphor of the Lion in Mesopotamian and Greek Civilization	255
Amar Annus and Mari Sarv	
The Ball Game Motif in the Gilgamesh Tradition and International Folklore	285
Thomas R. Kämmerer (Respondent)	
Response	297

Mesopotamia and the World: Interregional Interaction

Giovanni-Battista Lanfranchi (Chair)	
Introduction	307
Reinhard Pirngruber	
<i>šulmu jāši libbaka lu tābka</i> : The Interaction between the Neo-Assyrian King and the Outside World	317
André Heller	
Why the Greeks Know so Little about Assyrian and Babylonian History	331
Julien Monerie	
Writing Greek with Weapons Singularly Ill-designed for the Purpose: The Transcription of Greek in Cuneiform	349
Krzysztof Nawotka	
Alexander the Great in Babylon: Reality and Myth	365

Birgit Gufler and Irene Madreiter	
The Ancient Near East and the Genre of Greek Historiography.....	381
Simonetta Ponchia (Respondent)	
Response	397

The World of Politics: ‘Democracy’, Citizens, and ‘Polis’

Kurt A. Raaflaub (Chair)	
Introduction.....	413
Kristoffer Momrak	
Identifying Popular Power: Who were the People of Ancient Near Eastern City-States?	417
Kurt A. Raaflaub	
Lion’s Roar and Muses’ Song: Social and Political Thinking in Early Greek Poets and Early Israelite Prophets.....	433
Sabine Müller	
A History of Misunderstandings? Macedonian Politics and Persian Prototypes in Greek Polis-Centered Perspective.....	459
Raija Mattila (Respondent)	
Response	481

Iran and Early Islam

Lucian Reinfandt (Chair)	
Introduction.....	487
Aleksandra Szalc	
Semiramis and Alexander in the Diodorus Siculus’ Account (II 4–20).....	495
Tim Greenwood	
Oversight, Influence and Mesopotamian Connections to Armenia Across the Sasanian and Early Islamic Periods	509
Lutz Berger	
Empire-building vs. State-building between Late Antiquity and Early Islam	523
Josef Wiesehöfer (Respondent)	
Response	533

Representations of Power: Shaping the Past and the Present

Sabina Franke (Chair)	
Introduction.....	539

Frederick Mario Fales

- Looking the God in the Eye: Sennacherib's Bond with Destiny,
from Rock Reliefs to Cylinder Seals 543

Dirk Wicke

- Assyrian or Assyrianized: Reflections on the Impact of Assyrian Art
in Southern Anatolia 561

Rocío Da Riva

- Enduring Images of an Ephemeral Empire: Neo-Babylonian Inscriptions
and Representations on the Western Periphery 603

Christoph Schäfer

- Inspiration and Impact of Seleucid Royal Representation 631

Jonathan Valk and Beate Pongratz-Leisten (Respondent)

- Response 643

List of Contributors 653

Index 657

Metaphors for the Unrecognizability of God in Balag and Xenophanes

Sebastian Fink*

If we compare the depiction of gods in Greek sources like Homer and Hesiod with Mesopotamian epic tradition, we come to the conclusion that both of them provide us with the same anthropomorphic picture of the gods. Gods were depicted like human beings,¹ they live in houses, they need to eat and to drink, they interact with humans, they have strong emotions, they do stupid things under the influence of alcohol, sometimes they even fall in love with human beings – and at least one Mesopotamian hero denies the proposal of being a goddess's husband with very harsh words that reveal the bad character of this goddess.²

The picture of the gods in the epic and mythological tradition of Greece and Mesopotamia can be summarized in short: gods are human beings with supernatural powers and the gift of eternal life. So our conclusion could be that the religious imagination of Mesopotamia and Greece was very similar until something extraordinary happened in Greece – or to be more correct: on the eastern and western fringes of the Greek world. This extraordinary event, which is attributed with many names and even more interpretations, is the rise of rational science, which first appears under the name of philosophy.

According to Karl Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age this was the "axial breakthrough" that – according to most authors dealing with this theory – never took place in Mesopotamia.³ One of the earliest documents of the Greek Axial Age, with its rational spirit and its application on the field of religious beliefs, is found in the fragments of Xenophanes.⁴ As far as we know, Xenophanes was born in Colophon

* I have to thank Alan Lenzi and Sean Manning for their comments and for revising my English. The research presented here was made possible by a grant of the Austrian Science Fund, namely the "Glossary of the Sumerian Canonical Balag Songs" (Austrian Science Fund [FWF]: P 23323-G19).

¹ For a discussion of the "anthropocentric perception of the divine in Mesopotamian Art", see Ornan, 2009.

² Abusch, 1986.

³ For a short discussion of the somewhat curious idea of an Axial Age that divides the history of mankind in two distinct parts, see Fink, 2013: 79–80. Michalowski, 2005 discusses the Mesopotamian evidence in the light of the Axial Age theory. See also Larsen, 1987 for an illuminating critique of the idea of "the grand dichotomy".

⁴ For a discussion of Xenophanes life and work and his significance for the further development of philosophy see Schäfer, 1996. Heitsch, 1994 discusses Xenophanes' work and the

in Ionia around 570, left his home – maybe as a consequence of the establishment of Persian rule over Colophon⁵ – for Italy around 545 and died in the year 475. Already in antiquity Xenophanes was famous for criticizing Hesiod and Homer “for what they said about the gods” (DL IX, 18).⁶ The views on Xenophanes’ importance and the right interpretation of his work differ widely.⁷ Hermann Fränkel, a historian of philosophy, declared Xenophanes to be a daring hero of philosophy: “He dared, he, a Greek of the sixth century, to reject traditional tales as old inventions!”⁸ Paul Feyerabend’s approach to Xenophanes is somewhat less reverential. He just states that Xenophanes “was one of the first Western intellectuals” who “crisscrossed Greece and Ionia singing the old stories, but he also criticized them and made fun of them.”⁹ But how did Xenophanes reject the ideas of the gods presented by Hesiod and Homer? Let us have a look at the famous fragments:

“Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods
everything that is a shame and reproach among men,
stealing and committing adultery and deceiving the other.”
(Fr. 11, Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 193)

“But mortals consider that the gods are born,
and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.”
(Fr. 14, Clement *Strom.* V, 109, 2)

“The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black,
the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.”
(Fr. 16, Clement *Strom.* VII, 22, 1)

“But if cattle and horses or lions had hands,
or were able to draw with their hands and do works that man can do,
horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle,
and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.”
(Fr. 15, Clement *Strom.* V, 109, 3)

Xenophanes’ point seems to be clear. He states that the view of the gods presented by Hesiod and Homer is wrong because this view can be explained by its genealogy, or to use a term coined by Ludwig Feuerbach, by projection. For Xenophanes, the

origin of critical thought.

⁵ Nestle, 1942: 86 (Diogenes Laertius, IX, 18). For Xenophanes’ life also see Kirk et al., 1983: 164–165.

⁶ If not mentioned otherwise, the translation of Greek sources is taken from Kirk et al., 1983.

⁷ Kirk et al., 1983: 167–168.

⁸ Fränkel, 1955: 341 (Translation Paul Feyerabend). See also Nestle, 1942: 87: “Aber nicht in irgendwelchen physikalischen Einzelheiten liegt die Bedeutung des Xenophanes, sondern darin, daß er die von den Milesiern als nebensächlich behandelte Frage nach dem Wesen der Gottheit und ihrem Verhältnis zur Welt in den Mittelpunkt seines Denkens rückte. Damit wurde dem faulen Frieden zwischen Philosophie und Religion ein Ende gemacht und der Kampf gegen den Mythos im Interesse der Wahrheit mutig und rücksichtslos aufgenommen.”

⁹ Feyerabend, 1987: 13.

gods of Homer and Hesiod are a projection of human nature and especially of the failures of man. Paul Feyerabend states that Xenophanes just rejects the old view of the gods in order to introduce his new view, which is – at least in the eyes of Feyerabend – not any better than the old one.¹⁰ Martin West describes Xenophanes' argumentation as more scientific. According to him, Xenophanes “argues from empirical evidence (the Thracians and Negroes have conflicting conceptions of the gods, based on their own physiques) and generalizes it (animals no doubt do the same).”¹¹ I tend to Feyerabend's view that Xenophanes was making fun of the Homeric gods and that he tried to overcome this, at least in his opinion, inaccurate picture of the divine by ridiculing it. Historians of Philosophy called this a *reductio ad absurdum*. But no matter how we name the technique used by Xenophanes, it is quite convincing that for him as a singer, good jokes and the laughter of the audience were maybe more important than a scientific, rational approach to the divine. We just have to keep his audience in mind, which consisted of 6th century BCE Greeks, not 21st century CE philosophers. But here I am not going to discuss the right interpretation of Xenophanes. I just want to stress that Xenophanes' criticism implies that gods were not born, that they do not wear clothes, that they have no voices and no form or body, so that they cannot be described like human beings. Besides the fragments containing this criticism, we also have texts in which Xenophanes develops his own, positive picture of god:

“One god, greatest among gods and men,
in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought.”
(Fr. 23, Clement *Strom.* V, 109, 1)

“Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all;
nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times,
but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.”
(Fr. 26+25, Simplicius *in Phys.* 23, 11+32, 20)

“All of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.”
(Fr. 24, Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 144)

Xenophanes here introduces another picture of the divine, which reduces some anthropomorphic features of the god – he is “in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought” – and takes some other qualities, which are considered to be very important – vision, knowledge, and hearing – and maximizes them. His god does not walk around but steers the whole universe with his mind. Due to lacking evidence, it is not clear if Xenophanes got his knowledge about the divine from someone or if he developed it himself, but the general opinion is that Xenophanes first formulated the critique of the Homeric gods, and then, maybe “in vorgerückten Jahren”¹², he developed his new, constructive theology.¹³ We should also pay atten-

¹⁰ Feyerabend, 1987: 15–16.

¹¹ West, 1971: 228.

¹² Nestle, 1942: 90.

¹³ Kirk et al., 1983: 170: “This remarkable description was reached, probably, by taking the

tion to the fact that Xenophanes does not say that there is only one god – he just states that “one god alone is the greatest, the greatest of gods and of man.”¹⁴

The unrecognizability of god in Balaḡs

But now let us turn to Mesopotamia. In many aspects, Mesopotamian religion is anthropomorphic to excess. Gods are like human beings. They have to be dressed, they have to eat, and temples are built as their houses. They are married, they have a household and some of the gods even die.¹⁵ Besides this, there is some evidence that the anthropomorphic account was only one aspect of describing and understanding the divine in Mesopotamia. Divine beings also have an astral aspect and they can be observed on their way in the sky.¹⁶ And we also have to take into consideration the gods that were never or at least very seldom depicted, as for example An. But can we find textual evidence for a Mesopotamian Xenophanes? I think we can.

A first proof for the idea of the unrecognizability of god can be found in Gudea, statue B, column 8, line 48. The line is a part of a god list in a curse formula and it reads:

^dsuen-mu-ni lu₂ nu-du₈-de₃

“Suen, whose name nobody can explain (lit. open/solve).”¹⁷

Unfortunately, this remains unique in the whole Gudea corpus, and as far as I can see, this is also the only line where Gudea mentions Suen. Manfred Krebernik states that this line expresses that the etymology of the name Suen is unclear.¹⁸ It is quite a widespread belief that a name reveals the nature of its owner and, if Krebernik is right with his interpretation of this line, this shows us that already in the 3rd millennium BCE scribes tried to interpret and understand the divine by etymologizing and

very antithesis of the characteristics of a Homeric god. That thought or intelligence can affect things outside the thinker, without the agency of limbs, is a development – but a very bold one – of the Homeric idea that a god can accomplish his end merely by implanting, for example, Infatuation (Ἔρως) in a mortal.”

¹⁴ The question if Xenophanes was polytheist or one of the first monotheists is heavily disputed, especially in older literature. See for example Nestle, 1942: 90–91 and Kirk et al., 1983: 170. While Nestle is convinced that Xenophanes’ ideas of the divine excluded polytheism, Kirk et al. tend to the opinion that Xenophanes statement that one god alone is the greatest among gods and men “should not be taken literally.” The problem can be reduced to the question of whether Xenophanes uses the word “god” in the same way as later philosophers did, namely as the *ens perfectissimum* of the ontological proof. For a discussion of the history of ontological proof from Anselm to Hegel and the resulting picture of the divine, see Röd, 2009. A logical proof for the existence of one greatest god – which can quite easily be given and might be implied by the use of the superlative μέγιστος in Fr. 23 – is not found in the fragments of Xenophanes.

¹⁵ For a discussion of slaughtered gods see Krebernik, 2002.

¹⁶ The articles in Porter, 2009 discuss “anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic aspects of a deity in ancient Mesopotamia”.

¹⁷ Edzard, 1997: 37.

¹⁸ Krebernik, 1995: 362.

interpreting divine names. But if a god's name cannot be understood, if his name remains obscure even to the learned scribe, then the nature of the god remains a mystery. According to Konrad Volk, a line with a similar meaning can be found in the Balaĝ *uru₂ am₃-ma-ir-ra-bi*, Tablet 21, line 89.¹⁹ He translates the quite difficult line as:

mu suĥ-a-ĝu₁₀ gala-e-ne x[?] nu-mu-un-da-an-pa₃-da-e-[ne]
šu-mi na-as-qa ka-lu-ú [?] *PE-ta-a ul i-le-'e-ú*

“Meine(n) Wahlnamen können die gala-Priester nicht ergründen.”²⁰

“My chosen names cannot be explained (lit. found) by the gala-priests.”

In the second and first millennium, we have an increasing number of texts that emphasize the unrecognizability of god. In the following section, I will concentrate on examples from my actual field of research – the Balaĝ litanies.

Balaĝs are a part of a Sumerian cultic literature of lamentations and prayers that survived the end of Sumerian as a spoken language by about 2000 years, which means that the last dateable cuneiform texts with Balaĝ-litanies stem from the 1st century BCE.²¹ The language of these prayers is Emesal, a kind of literary dialect of Sumerian.²² On first sight, Balaĝ-litanies are very boring texts, as they have no clear narrative line and the different compositions frequently use common sequences of lines. The content of all Balaĝ-litanies is very similar. Balaĝs contain parts in which the gods are praised, long litanies trying to calm the gods and long litanies of destroyed temples and cities. The main aim of performing a Balaĝ was to calm the possible wrath of a god, so they were performed on fixed dates of the cultic calendar, but also on all kind of “dangerous” occasions, such as restorations of a statue of a god, the restoration of a temple, or at ominous situations like solar and lunar eclipses.²³

Balaĝs are not the most exciting literature from Mesopotamia, but they were copied and performed for about 2000 years and they were supposed to contain secret wisdom.²⁴ This can be proved by the numerous Akkadian interlinear translations that are found on the cuneiform tablets containing Balaĝs. Stefan Maul drew our attention to one text containing no less than five different Akkadian translations of one Sumerian line.²⁵ This, and several tablets giving variants of Akkadian translations

¹⁹ As far as I can see we only have one tablet, namely SBH 56 (VAT 276+) from the late first millennium, as a source for this line.

²⁰ Volk, 1989: 206. Cohen, 1988: 598 translates not very convincingly “My choice name prevents the gala-priests from calling out (in song).”

²¹ Reisner, 1896: XIII–XIV gives the basic facts about the scribes and the dating of the latest manuscripts. According to Reisner, the year 81 BCE marks the end of the transmission of dateable manuscripts, but there is no need to argue that this was also the end of the use of these texts in cult.

²² For an in-depth discussion of Emesal see Schretter, 1990.

²³ Löhnert, 2009: 55–61

²⁴ Lenzi, 2008: 95–97.

²⁵ Maul, 2005: 22. For a general discussion of Akkadian translations of Emesal-text see Maul,

from different manuscripts, shows that the Akkadian translations themselves became canonical at some point and were copied by the scribes as well as the Sumerian text. Therefore, the scribes were convinced that they were the guardians of a secret knowledge of the divine. Even in the commentary-texts mostly occupied with “the sphere of the exorcist (*āšipu*), and not with the lamentation priest (*kalû*)”,²⁶ references to the *kalûtu*, the corpus of the *gala/kalû*, can be found.²⁷

The word of the god(s)

In the Balaĝ u₄-dam ki am₃-us₂ (“It touches the earth like a storm”), the “word” (e-ne-eĝ₃) of the god is described. The actions described in the text are not carried out by the god himself. So the god does not walk to the place where he wants to carry out his task, but instead uses his divine word. We remember that, according to Xenophanes, it is unseemly for gods “to walk now to this, now to that place.”

The word comes from eight deities (An, Enlil, Enki, Asarluhi, Enbilulu, Muzeb-basa, Sheddukisharra, Dikumaham) and it seems that these names were regarded as different aspects of one deity, at least according to the grammar, because the word is referred to as “his word” (with -ani, the possessive-suffix for the 3rd person singular) later on. The passage reads as follows:

- 11 “The word, which causes the heavens to rumble above!
- 12 The word, which causes the earth to shake below!
- 13 The word, (at) which the Anunna-gods stumble!
- 14 His word has no diviner. It has no interpreter.
- 15 His word, a swelling flood, is unopposed.²⁸
- (...)
- 22 His word fells the huge mes-trees.
- 23 His word, a storm turning (all) into ruins!
- 24 The word of Enlil rushes about. No one can see it.²⁹
- (...)
- 35 Let me bring his word to the diviner and that diviner will lie.

1997.

²⁶ Frahm, 2011: 99.

²⁷ Frahm, 2011: 99–101.

²⁸ B5 (122–123). The B-numbers refer to the enumeration of the canonical Balaĝ-lamentations according to Black 1987. The numbers in brackets refer to the pages of the edition in Cohen 1988. The transliterations and translations presented here are those of Cohen, sometimes with slight variations. Here I omit the Akkadian interlinear translations and some Sumerian variants: ¹¹e-ne-eĝ₃ an-še₃ an al-dub₂-ba-an-ne₂ ¹²e-ne-eĝ₃ ki-še₃ ki al-sig₃-ga-ne ¹³e-ne-eĝ₃ ^da-nun-na in-ge₁₆-le-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-eš-a-ne₂ ¹⁴e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ a-zu nu-un-tuku šim-mu₂ nu-un-tuku ¹⁵e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ a-ma-ru zi-ga gaba-šu-gar nu-un-tuku.

²⁹ B5 (123–124): ²²umun e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ ^{giš}mes gal-gal-la gur₂-gur₂-ru-šam-ma ²³[en-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ u₄-d]e₃ du₆-du₆-da šu-še₃ al-[ma-ma] ²⁴[en-ne-eĝ₃] ^dmu-lil₂-la₂-ke₄ bu₅-bu₅-am₃ i-bi₂ nu-bar-bar-[re].

- 36 Let me bring his word to the interpreter and that interpreter will lie.³⁰
(...)
41 His word is a covered fermentation vat. Who may know what is inside
it?
42 His word, whose interior is unknown, its exterior tramples down (every-
thing).
43 His word, whose exterior is unknown, its interior tramples down (every-
thing).”³¹

This passage is by no means unique in the Balaĝ-corpus. This eneĝ passage is re-used for other Balaĝs; Joachim Krecher called these reusable parts “Versatzstücke”, so it appears in more or less exactly the same form, but in a slightly different order in other Balaĝs. This – and the fact that Balaĝs were also used in state cult – means that these ideas regarding the divine word were a part of a broader tradition, and not just the statement of a philosophical incantation-priest.

These lines describe the word of the god(s) as something very mighty, which surely has no human form, which cannot be interpreted – it has no diviner, it has no interpreter – and which cannot be seen. The nicest metaphor used here is taken from the brewing process and refers to the gakkul vat, which is as a “rather paunchy vessel with a narrow opening” which “was kept carefully closed, and has become thus a literary image of mystery and secrecy.”³² Interestingly, the word of the god is often attributed with the ability to let the heavens rumble and the earth shake – not unlike in Fr. 26+25 of Xenophanes, where he states that the god shakes (κραδαίνει) all things.

The god does not walk

This beer metaphor is reused in another Balaĝ (Uruhulake of Gula), but unfortunately in a broken context:

- 86 “Lord Enlil [...]
87 Lord of the lands, like beer [...]
88 Lord of the lands, you do not move about like mortal (lit. living) man.
89 You do not move about as I would.”³³

³⁰ B5 (124): ³⁵e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ šim-mu₂ ga-am₃-ma-ga šim-mu-bi lul-la ³⁶e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ne₂ mu u₈-u₃ mu-ak mu-bi še am₃-ša₄.

³¹ BB (125): ⁴¹e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ni gakkul-am₃-ma al-šu₂ ša₃-bi a-ba mu-un-zu-zu
⁴²e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ni ša₃-bi nu-un-zu-a bar-bi al-us₂-sa ⁴³e-ne-eĝ₃-ĝa₂-ni bar-bi nu-un-zu-a ša₃-bi al-us₂-sa.

³² Civil, 1964, 83–84.

³³ B11 (258): ⁸⁶umun ^dmu-ul-lil₂-le [...] ⁸⁷umun kur-kur-ra-ke₄ kaš-gin₇ du[g[?] ...] ⁸⁸umun kur-kur-ra mu-lu til-la-gin₇ na-ra-[di-di-in] ⁸⁹ša₃-mu ma-al-la-gin₇ na-ra-[di-di-in].

This passage, of which lines 87 and 88 also occur in other Balaĝs, tells us that there is a difference between Enlil and the mortals. Enlil does not walk around “like mortal man”, so the anthropomorphic schema is also broken up in these lines.

The god cannot be understood

Quite a lot of very similar and often occurring lines in the Balaĝ-corpus stress that humans are not able to understand the gods – a topic which is quite popular in other genres too, especially in prayers or laments that want to explain personal suffering or general disaster.³⁴ To give an impression of this topic in the Balaĝs, I will just quote some lines below with the same ending, the rhetorical question “what can one know about you?”³⁵:

- 1 “Lord respected one of heaven and earth, what can one know about you?
- 2 Bison, lord, respected one of heaven and earth, what can one know about you?
- 2–17 [Here follows a litany of 18 lines with different names and attributes of the god], (what can one know about you)?
- 21 Bison, sheltering roof of the shrine of Apsu, (what can one know about you)?”³⁶

The god is not born by a mother

Some very interesting lines of text which are – at least as far as I know – only used once in the Balaĝs (Cohen has two references, but one of them is restored from the passage below) and contradict the very common motive in mythology of a god being born by a goddess:

- 31 “my bison, surpassing as heavens,
- 32 my great hero, wide as the earth,
- 33 when you are as surpassing as heaven and earth,
- 34 hero, when you stride through the rebellious land,
- 35 bison, when you did not come forth from the womb of a woman, (what can one know about you)?”³⁷

³⁴ Vgl. Fink, 2012: 93.

³⁵ The passage in Sumerian reads *mu-lu ta-zu mu-un-zu*. A translation that might be somewhat closer to the original reminds us of the scholastic abstractions of interrogatives: “Who knows about your *quidditas*?” The word *ta* is Emesal for main dialect *a.na* “What?” (see Schretter, 1990: 260–261) and the 2nd person possessive pronoun *-zu*, which can only be added to a substantive, makes clear that *ta* has to be understood as a substantive.

³⁶ B21 (413–414): ¹*umun še-er-ma-al-la an-ki-a mu-lu ta-zu mu-un-zu* ²*alim-ma umun še-er-ma-al-la an-ki-a mu-lu ta- [...]* ²¹*alim-ma a₂-bad₃ eš₃-abzu-ke₄*.

³⁷ B27 (459): ³¹*alim-ma an-gin₇ [rib-ba-ĝu₁₀]* ³²*ur-saĝ gal ki-gin₇ sig₃-ga-ĝu₁₀* ³³*an-gin₇ ki-gin₇ rib-ba-zu-de₃* ³⁴*ur-saĝ ki-bal-la di-da-zu-de₃* ³⁵*alim-ma pap-hal nu-nuz-ke₄ nu-e₃-a-zu-de₃*. The Akkadian equivalent of this unique line is

A passage which may have a similar meaning – the creation of a god not by birth – is found in the Address of Marduk to the Demons, where it is said that Marduk/Asarluhi “was created (*banū*) by his own command (*tēmu*)”³⁸ To give another allusion to medieval speculation about the divine: Marduk is the *causa sui* (the cause of himself).

One god alone is the greatest

Here I will just quote two examples of the exaltation of one god, which is supposed to be the greatest of all gods. This motive of “the greatest god” is widespread in Mesopotamian literature:

- 21 “You are exalted! You are exalted!
 22 Lord of the lands, you are exalted!
 23 In heaven, who is exalted? It is you who is exalted.
 24 On earth, who is exalted? It is you who is exalted.
 25 Lord of all the heaven, lord of all the earth,
 26 from the land where the sun rises to the land where the sun sets,
 27 in the land there is (lit. lives) no other lord. You serve as lord.³⁹
 (...)
 34 Lord, who is worthy of you? Who can compare to you?
 35 Great hero, who is worthy of you? Who can compare to you?
 36 Asarluhi, who is worthy of you? Who can compare to you? [...]
 (...)
 44 Lord, you are exalted. Who can compare to you?
 45 Asarluhi, you are superior to any god, whatever he be named.”⁴⁰

kab-tu₄ ša ina pu-šu-uq : pi-riš-tu₂ [sin-niš-ti] la uš-ša-a (CAD P, 543, s.v. *pušqu* and 398 s.v. *pirištu* has no further references of the topic of not being born).

³⁸ Lambert, 1954–1956: 315, line F 6: *KI.MINA ša₂ ina te₃-mi-šu₂ ib-ba-nu-u a-na-ku*. Lambert, 1954–1956: 320 states: “The line is very interesting for the history of religion, as the self-begetting of a god is an intermediate step between a god born by the will of this parents, and a god with no beginning.” It should also be mentioned that the semantic range of *tēmu* is quite broad and it can also be understood as will, decision, plan, reason. See CAD T: 85, s.v. *tēmu*.

³⁹ B13 (341): ²¹za-e maḥ-men₃ za-e maḥ-men₃ ²²u₃-mu-un-e kur-kur-ra za-e maḥ-men₃ ²³an-e a-ba maḥ-men₃ za-e-men₃ maḥ-men₃ ²⁴ki-e a-ba maḥ-men₃ za-e-men₃ maḥ-men₃ ²⁵u₃-mu-un za₃-an-na u₃-mu-un za₃-ki-k[e]₄ ²⁶kur ^dutu-e₃-a-ta kur ^dutu-šu₂-a-še₃ ²⁷kur-ra u₃-mu-un nu-mu-un-ti za-e u₃-mu-un ab-ak.

⁴⁰ B21 (415): ³⁴umun a-ba e-sa₅ a-ba [e-d]a-sa₂ ³⁵ur-saḡ gal a-ba e-sa₅ a-b[a e]-d[a]-s[a₂] ^{36d}as[ar]-l[u-hi a-ba e-sa₅ a-ba e-da-sa₂] (...) ⁴⁴umun za-e maḥ-me-en a-ba-gi₄ a-da-sa₂ ^{45d}asar-lu₂-hi diṅṅir mu-sa₄-a-ta za-e ši-in-diri-ge-en.

The importance of Mesopotamian texts for our understanding of Greek philosophy and religion

I have checked a promising but quite limited corpus for occurrences of the idea of the unrecognizability of god, which, according to most of the historians of philosophy, appeared first with Xenophanes or Plato. The occurrence of this idea is often described as progress towards a more reasonable picture of the divine. Paul Feyerabend stressed the fact that Xenophanes’ picture of the divine being is not more accurate than Homers’ picture of the gods,⁴¹ or, to express it in terms of negative theology: everything positive you say about god is wrong.

I think that it is quite important to recognize that Xenophanes’ criticism of anthropomorphism was not something new and that we have Mesopotamian evidence for the idea of the unrecognizability of god – if my interpretation of the line in Gudea is correct – from the third millennium onwards in a broad variety of texts, especially in prayers and wisdom literature. The Balaḡs and Xenophanes even share some of the metaphors used for the unrecognizability of god: the god is not born, he does not walk like a human being and he shakes the earth with his mind or his word.

The above demonstrates that even Balaḡs – which are famous for being the most boring texts from Mesopotamia – can provide something useful to the history of ideas. That the importance of the Mesopotamian evidence is underrated or simply ignored by quite a lot of historians of science or especially historians of philosophy is only partly their fault. As Simo Parpola already stated on the occasion of the 4th Melammu symposia in 2001, “Today, 72 [now 85] years after the appearance of the second, completely revised edition of Jeremias’s *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur*, this work remains the only systematic, well-documented attempt to reconstruct the Mesopotamian world-view and correlate it with other comparable systems in the ancient world.”⁴²

Conclusion: Xenophanes and the East

But let us return to Xenophanes. What does this mean for our understanding of his work? First of all, it seems clear that the idea of non-anthropomorphic gods was not something new. The idea of the unrecognizability of god is widespread in Sumerian and Akkadian sources and it is quite possible that it was also found in Phoenician or Aramaic prayers that were influenced by this tradition. So it seems possible that we have a direct line from the Balaḡs to the travelling philosopher Xenophanes,⁴³ maybe with some intermediates, but it is also quite possible that in Greek religion two pictures of the divine could be found. One popular version as used in Mesopotamian epics of the god as a human being with superpowers and the other, maybe less pop-

⁴¹ Feyerabend states that Xenophanes created a “monster considerably more terrible than the slightly immoral Homeric god could ever aspire to be.” Feyerabend, 1987: 16.

⁴² Parpola, 2004: 240.

⁴³ For the widespread motive of the travelling philosopher, see e.g. Clark, 2013: 81–101. Dörrie, 1973 gives an account of the alleged travels of Plato.

ular version of a distant and hard-to-understand god.

If we take these possibilities into account, our picture of Xenophanes changes. In one case – if we take the possibility of a cultural transfer at Xenophanes' time into account – Xenophanes criticizes the Greek picture of the divine by using barbarian wisdom.⁴⁴ If we opt for the second possibility – that the unrecognizability of god was already present in Greek religion at Xenophanes' time – Xenophanes becomes a conservative criticizing Homer and Hesiod for their all-too-human picture of the divine, which, at least according to Herodotus (II, 49), was quite influential and introduced new beliefs in Greece.

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⁴⁴ For a short overview of the Greek judgment of the Barbarians, especially concerning their wisdom, see Dörrie, 1972.

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