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Autoreferát disertační práce

Life, Society, and Politics in Relation to Religion at Ugarit in the Late Bronze Age

Život, společnost a politika ve vztahu k náboženství v Ugaritu v pozdní době bronzové

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Summary of the Thesis

The presented thesis aims to explore the religion at Ugarit, an ancient city located in modern tell Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast of the Meditterannean. The timeframe is limited to the Late Bronze Age, namely to roughly 1350–1180 BC. Within this timeframe, the sources are more concentrated in its second half. The site has been discovered in 1929 and the excavations were continuously carried out ever since with only several interruptions. Ugarit has been chosen as a suitable site for exploring religion due to the rich finds, including several thousands of written documents. In comparison with other sies of the LBA Syria, Ugarit provides by far the best evidence for religious activities.

At the same time, the religion is in this thesis explored as an integral part of the lived reality. The basic presupposition is that religion is not a secluded sphere of the human condition, but it permeates through different aspects of life. As such, the scope of this thesis is extremely broad. It must be stressed that it never aimed at exploring this issue in its complexity. Such an endeavour is next to impossible even in such a limited case study. Instead, several areas of interest and approaches to the issue have been selected. Each chapter demonstrates a different perspective through which we can explore how religion permeated the lived reality at Ugarit.

Chapter 1) Introduction

The introductory chapter deals with a general overview of the structure of the thesis and presents basic premises and problems. Several methodological remarks aim to present my theoretical background, mainly the anthropology of religion, social constructivism, theory of social myths, and Actor-Network theory. My perspective on the concept of "religion" is briefly introduced. These short remarks serve to reveal my starting position from which I approach the material. A basic overview of the history of research on the site and publication of excavated materials is presented.

Chapter 2) Contexts of Religion at Ugarit

This chapter explores the basic contexts in which the religion at Ugarit was lived. The natural conditions, historical circumstances, and social relations are shown as essential factors in the formation of religious realia at Ugarit. Many factors, from the presence of mountains and sea to celestial phenomena to varying temperatures and precipitations to the availability of natural resources to family relations and political dependencies or cultural heritage of the ANE, contributed to religion's character at Ugarit or issues the religion dealt with. Rather than being a comprehensive list of the factors that participated in the continuous process of the construction of reality, this chapter aims to highlight the contextual approach to the study of religion.

Chapter 3) Conceptions of Divinity

The next chapter focuses on one of the core concepts of religion at Ugarit, the deities. This concept is problematised as similarly non-evident as the concept of religion itself. The chosen approach is to explore different materials and examine how the deities manifested through them. The material character of deities is highlighted. Gods and goddesses of Ugarit are considered as actors in the social relations who had an essential impact on the lives of the inhabitants of Ugarit. Through their earthly representations, they were present in the city and needed care of sacrifices and other services. Some deities were even present in numerous manifestations, and each of them was an obligation to the city.

At the same time, the explored materials show that the conception of deities included a certain level of playfulness that went hand in hand with seriousness. The roles of deities in the social

lives of the inhabitants were highly varied. Some deities were lively present in the city, while others were present only in lists and maybe not even taken seriously by the scholars who "invented" them to fill a position in a list of Mesopotamian origin. The deities of Ugarit were part of a broader cultural milieu of the ANE and were compared with members of different pantheons, but these comparisons were scarcely strict and definite equations.

The issue of anthropomorphism is also addressed. Although the deities were mostly depicted and described in anthropomorphic terms, they were not bound to the human form. Deities could manifest in natural phenomena or in physical objects, probably without the necessity of being anthropomorphised.

In sum, the conception of deities at Ugarit is far from being clear and straightforward. The resulting description is somewhat reminiscent of a mosaic composed of different conceptions changing according to the contexts in which the deities appear.

Chapter 4) Texts and Religion

In the fourth chapter, we explore the problematics of religion and written sources. The chosen approach was inspired by the Actor-Network theory, and texts are considered as actors in the social life at Ugarit that also act as materials beyond their contents. As such, texts worked on many levels. Firstly, the role of individual scripts and languages is addressed. From this perspective, of particular importance to the lived religion at Ugarit were Ugaritic as the vernacular and Hurrian as specifically cultural/cultic languages. Akkadian or Sumerian religious texts were mostly a matter of scribal culture. Nonetheless, we try to demonstrate that even the educational activities might have had a profound impact on the social reality.

Texts are then used to explore the hubs, or nodes, of religious life at the tell as manifested in writing. Three main clusters are identified, each with some specific role in religious life. The *House of the High Priest* and the *House of the Hurrian Priest* were the hubs most focused on cultic activities, including the cults with royal participation. The *House of the High Priest* then included a larger number of narrative texts, while the *House of the Hurrian Priest* was more invested in the practice of divination. Still, they both cooperated with the *Royal Palace*. The seat of the Ugaritic king was the third most crucial hub of religious life in writing. There, the majority of texts belonged to the category of divination, represented by ivory models of the liver, and to the category of hymns written in Hurrian, arguably to be used in ritual practice. These three hubs were the primary and heavily interconnected nodes of religious organisation. The other clusters of texts in the city demonstrate different sides of religion, represented mainly by the accumulation of scholarly knowledge of foreign origin. The exception in this regard was the *House of Urtēnu,* which yielded several important religious documents related to the royal ideology.

The chapter also outlines a preliminary consideration of how texts acted irrespective of their written contents. The very fact of writing changes the character of the society, even in the cases when the vast majority is imagined as illiterates. Writing may, for example, work as an authoritative act in administration, legal activities, or on seals. This authority also affected those who did not precisely understand the written message.

Chapter 5) Religion and the City Environs

The fifth chapter presents the other side of the coin. Here, the archaeological material is given preference in contrast to the texts. The discussion mainly focuses on the temple/sanctuary buildings.

Firstly, the ideology and function of such structures are considered in relation to the conception of deities. The temples are shown as households of deities, which facilitated the cult and mediated human contact with the divine. Further, the discussion focuses on describing the preserved state and preliminary interpretations of these structures. Here, we discuss the following structures: *Temple of Baʿal, Temple/Terrace of Dagan, Palatial Temple, Pillared Building, Royal Palace, Temple of Rhytons, Court III of the Great Building in the Rampart area,* and *Building with the Rock-Hewn Throne.* It demonstrates how the religious space permeated the fabric of the city, including the residential area. The historical development of the city is also considered, especially the consequences of an earthquake which damaged sacred architecture.

The second part focuses on the religion as represented in the domestic architecture. Here, we mainly problematise the possibilities of such an endeavour. Several materials indicating the dispersion of religious activities within the domestic space are addressed, namely figurines of deities, "ladles", depots, and household tombs. Largely problematised is the issue of the "cult of the dead". It is considered as a concept that, in many ways, distorts our understanding of the material and may lead us to unfounded conclusions.

Even though the chapter provides some basic and relatively comprehensive overviews of the temples and sanctuaries of Ugarit, the general conclusions are not as promising as I had hoped for. The final discussion primarily focuses on the complications and limits I have encountered. The issue of environmental interconnectedness is articulated primarily in questions rather than in answers. For example, why were some sacred structures given preference in reconstruction to others? How were the stelae dispersed over the city, and how did they contribute to the construction of the religious space? The answers to these questions were limited both by my limited orientation in archaeological material and by the state of the material itself.

Chapter 6) Religion in the Life of the City

The largest part of the thesis is devoted to several topics illustrating how religion permeated different spheres of life in the city. The discussion begins with the topic of onomastics. The practice of naming, especially people, occasionally attests to religious realia. Individuals included divine names in their own names or otherwise referred to religious practices. A short cross-reference with the cultic preference for deities is considered. The names mostly do not correspond to the cultic practice. This problematises the often-postulated assumption that onomastics may be used as a source for cultic practice. The preferences in naming seem to have been quite different from the official ritual practice. The names also provide a valuable reflection of the conception of deities. While different manifestations of deities might have occupied the cult, the naming practice mostly maintained the unity of individual deities. A short exploration of the clergy's names was carried out to find out if their names could have somehow reflected their occupation. Unfortunately, the data are extremely scarce. The few sources we can explore indicate that a preference for names with theophoric elements or Hurrian names might have appeared. This could indicate a practice of deliberate name change of the priests or the intention of their fathers, who themselves might have already been priests. We also briefly address the topic of the symbolic power of names, which may be attested, for example, in the narrative traditions, like naming the weapons of Baʿal or the use of contrasting names of the royal daughters in the royal epics.

The second section is aimed at exploring the place of cultic activities within the society. The case of running the cult is considered from the perspective of occupation categories, namely the

clergy: *khnm* and *qdšm*. Unfortunately, the sources do not allow us to properly articulate their precise roles. The care for the temples and cults was not limited to clergy and other "professionals" also participated in it, from singers to the builders of the temples. The position of *tᶜy* is considered as a possible mediation between the political sphere and cults. Next, numerous questions related to the public participation in cults are addressed. These included the questions of accessibility of the temples, participation in public feasts or communal and private contributions to the sacrifices. The community's interactions with the temples are shown as an integral part of the social life. Finally, the issues of private religious activities are briefly explored, mainly by addressing the institution of *marziḫu*.

Next, divinatory practices are considered primarily from the perspective of the *House of the Hurrian priest,* which yielded numerous materials that attest to the lived practices of divination. The issue of divination for private individuals is connected with the sacrificial practice needed for obtaining the animal viscera. It is argued that the divination for the inhabitants was not entirely disconnected from the divination for the benefit of the kingdom. This is further addressed in one of the following chapters. An astromantic text is then discussed as material for the reflection on the research of Ugaritic materials. The varied approaches applied to this text and its connections to astronomical realia present an interesting case study on the problematics of Ugaritic studies.

The fourth section of this broad chapter discusses how religion was related to the best-attested activity at Ugarit – administration and economy. The ritual texts are considered as administrative texts. It is argued that their existence might have been motivated by the need for administration, inspired by the similar practice in economic relations outside of the cult. Their specific traits may reflect primarily the particular needs of the cultic administration and not necessarily a clearly distinct genre of ritual texts. The need for material supplies for the cultic activities is then addressed as a complex confluence of state-sponsored, communal, and individual contributions. Even though the "temple economy" is not a fitting description for Ugaritic economic relations, the temples were important economic actors, owned property and were active in this regard. Yet another perspective on the administration of religion is provided by the administration of temple personnel that is well attested from the perspective outside of the cultic context, especially by the *Royal Palace*. From the perspective of general administration, religion was often administered side by side with other categories.

Next, the category of legal activities is explored. There, three core themes are discussed. First, the references to deities as guarantors of agreements are addressed. These references were relatively scarce at Ugarit. They were most importantly used in the case of international treaties or issues where the authority of the king or witnesses was not sufficient. Here, we may truly observe the deities as "antistructural guarantors of the order". Second, the employment of religious imagery in legal texts is explored, together with a consideration of the ritual nature of the legal activities themselves. In this perspective, the legal activities may well be perceived as a complex set of ritualised activities with severe social implications. Last, the few references to religious realia appearing in legal texts are documented. These relate, for example, to the mention of priests, to property issues of temples, or to matters surrounding private religious institutions like *marziḫu*.

The sixth section deals with Ugaritic epistolary documents. Letters are one of the best attestations of interpersonal communication we possess. Religion appeared in many modalities in these sources. Religion was essential to symbolic communication, especially in addressing deities in many forms of benedictions between the correspondents. However, the issue of the symbolic

component is far broader. Some of the letters even attest only to symbolic communication and lack any other message. Thus, the letters are excellent attestations of the constant construction of social realities at Ugarit. Other modalities in which correspondence relates to religion are references to numerous religious realia, either complexly or only in passing. As such, these letters attest to the dispersion of religion into different spheres of life. Last but not least, the references to Egyptian and Hittite rulers in letters are addressed. The discussion shows how the articulation of their position with the use of imagery of the Sun-Deities worked in constructing the political relations between the kingdoms. In the case of Hittite kings, the religious imagery might have been further supported by the use of seals impressed on the letters.

The final section focuses on seals. The creation of many of the seals from Ugarit does not correspond to the timeframe in which they were actively used. This has severe implications for the proposed interpretations. Often, the motives engraved on seals were not of local character but were based on foreign models. We may then ask how the motives were perceived and what they can tell us about the religious practices and ideas. The primary focus is directed on their potential as objects that express identity and confirm authority. The engraved motives might have played numerous roles, from reflecting personal artistic preference, prestige, or contacts with particular areas of the world. Practised reusing and recarving of seals are detected as an essential feature in the construction of the authority of these objects. Some seals also employed a pseudo-script, a fact that can be further related to the previous discussion on the materiality of texts. The preserved evidence also indicates that most of the seals were not impressed. Therefore, it is argued that seals were important objects for symbolic communication irrespective of their "primary" use – sealing. The seals could have also worked as objects of adornment, amulets, or votive offerings. The chapter concludes with a short discussion on royal seals. There, interesting dynamics seem to have been at work between the dynastic seal of *Yaqaru* and the personal seals of individual kings.

Chapter 7) Politics and Religion

The final chapter explores several modalities in which politics interacted with religion. In numerous instances, this topic found its way into the previous chapters. The palace was one of the most important legal, administrative, and economic actors; members of the royal family belonged among the most frequent correspondents, and the state sponsored many of the cultic activities.

The involvement of the king and the palace institution is explored in the first section. Even though the king, royal family, or the palace have been an integral part of numerous rituals, this cult was still organised primarily from the houses associated with the clergy. We have already encountered this issue within the discussion of the hubs of religious texts in the city. The relatively common conception of the king as the highest cultic officiant or as the primary mediator between deities and humankind is contested. Instead, it is suggested that the *Royal Palace*, *House of the Hurrian Priest*, and *House of the High Priest* functioned as a network that mutually supported the needs of one another. The rituals also show how essential were the religious activities for the palace.

The importance of religion for the palace institution is further discussed in the next section. There, we direct our attention to divination. The collection of ivory models from the *Royal Palace*, some of which were inscribed, is used as a starting point for demonstrating the importance of divination for the state. These models are further contextualised with the models and divinatory compendia from the *House of the Hurrian Priest,* often regarded as examples of divination for private individuals. In light of the comparative evidence, it is argued that observations from private

divinations might have affected the state. The evidence may point towards a "constant awareness" of diviners and scholars for signs that the gods revealed and which might have been relevant to the palace.

The central part of this chapter is dedicated to the possibilities of the use of narrative compositions for the construction of royal ideology. The royal narratives of Aqhat and Kirta are explored from the theoretical standpoint of "social myths". This has led to a broader contextualisation of these texts. The discussion includes, for example, the social position of the author of these narratives, historical and environmental contexts, political relations, or the presence of Assyrian narrative propaganda at Ugarit. Various strategies of persuasion employed in the narratives are considered. Special attention is paid to the motives of failure described in the stories. The chosen approach is used in an attempt to demonstrate that these failures did not need to diminish the political message of the narratives but might have worked for the political representation. The two narratives seem to work in tandem in order to address some pressing issues the Ugaritic society and the political representation faced. Tentatively, it is also argued that the position of royal women at Ugarit might have been an important element reflected in the narratives. The discussion is aimed at demonstrating how the epic narratives might have worked as a lived reality and not only as a piece of literature.

The final section of the last chapter addresses the complex issue of the divine nature of the kings of Ugarit. The situation is described as similarly fluid as the conception of deities. While the sources attested to a certain level of deification of the deceased kings of Ugarit, this might not have been a strongly established tradition. There were only a few contexts in which this conception was articulated, but such conceptions were generally ignored. It is also pondered that this may reflect an emergent tradition and not necessarily a long-established cultural fact.

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

The aimed scope of the thesis is obviously extremely broad. Nearly all of the discussed topics have already been addressed by some scholars, many of them repeatedly. Therefore, we may ask if there is anything new to be added to the discussion. Admittedly, I am not able to explore any new material as I do not have access to the unpublished materials. My contribution hopefully consists in presenting some new perspectives on the long-known data. The old material is set in new contexts. The broad focus of the thesis allowed me to consider different aspects of religious life within the wide array of other realities. Still, there are chapters where my contribution is mainly in collecting and contextualising already known interpretations. Some other chapters were aimed at deconstructing the "known" facts, but no solid alternatives were presented because I consider the sources inadequate. Because of the broadness of the addressed topics, the various little contributions are hard to grasp in any comprehensive way. There is no single great thesis in this dissertation (except for "religion was lived"), but rather a number of smaller statements that provide individual explorations and reflections of the interpreted material.

I believe that the core aim of this thesis was successfully achieved. The religion at Ugarit was indeed explored as a lived reality that permeated numerous aspects of life while at the same time not being pushed everywhere at all costs. The ancient society should not be imagined as wholly enchanted and emerged in mystical participations; such a perspective often leads us to ignore that the society was indeed technologically skilled and often practically oriented. In this regard, the religion

may be also perceived as a part of the practical way of living as it, for example, in many ways facilitated social relations.

There also are several discussions where I believe I have contributed to the field (slightly) more significantly. For example, the reflections on deities, in my opinion, deepen our understanding of how fluidly these entities were conceptualised. The perspective of lived practices leads us to reconsider the search for exact definitions and conceptions. I consider the contextuality of deities an important aspect of their character that is often overlooked. At the same time, the acknowledgement that these varied conceptions are only how the social reality of deities was materialised in the source is an essential feature to be always taken into consideration.

The chapter on texts presents, among others, a discussion on religious "hubs" based on a broader statistical analysis of the clusters of texts at Ugarit. This analysis has enabled a broader exploration of how religious texts were distributed within the city and how the individual archives were interconnected in their religious practices. This is discussed hand in hand with the different uses of the several languages attested at Ugarit. At the same time, the materiality of written sources is highlighted as an essential part of their presence in society. Texts were considered as actors in the relations, as material that significantly influence the lived reality.

The case of political divination is, in my opinion, an interesting contribution to the relations of politics and religious practices. It made use of an often-ignored collection of ivory divinatory models of livers from the Royal Palace and contextualised them within the practice of divination for private individuals. Building upon comparative evidence, the private divinations may be considered as relevant to the state matters. In my opinion, the possible political dimensions of divination for the Ugaritic royalty were not yet appreciated enough.

Last but not least, the most interpretative and theoretically substantial chapter has been made on the role of royal narratives in political propaganda. While such a view on the narratives is not anyhow new, the broader perspective I have decided to follow brings, in my opinion, a novel line of enquiry. The application of the concept of social myths has allowed me to focus my attention on a wide range of contexts that together work to support the possible political dimensions of these narratives.

Secondary Outcomes

Apart from the thesis itself, the work has led me to create two side products that are also relevant. The first is a database of texts from Ugarit created as a base for the chapter 4 – Texts and Religion. As discussed in this chapter, statistical analysis of the corpus from Ugarit is evry complicated and no complete database exists. The database I have created does not fix this issue but some improvements were hopefully made. In addition, the database was created with aim to reflect religious realia and is therefore enriched with additional information.[1]

The second outcome of this thesis is a 3D reconstruction of the Temple of Baʿal at the Acropolis. Initially, this has been created for fun and in order to avoid copyright issues with the illustrations. In the end, it has ended as a starting part of a future project in which I hope to reconstruct at least some parts of the city of Ugarit and make it accessible via VR technologies and as a sort of "game". See end of the chapter 5 – Religion and the City Environs.

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[1] See GitHub repository for the thesis: https://github.com/valekfrantisek/UgariticReligion [accessed 26th September 2023].

Selected Bibliography

The following list present a short selection from bibliography. It reflects what I consider the most essential works in regard to the thesis. For full bibliography, see the thesis.

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Overview of Academic Profile

Professional experience

2023–present	Researcher, Institute of Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
2022–present	Assistant, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Pardubice
2020–present	Junior Researcher and Data Analyst in Digital Humanities, National Library of the Czech Republic (Projects DL4DH and DigiLab)
2020–2023	Grant Advisor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
2019–present	Member of the editorial board of the student religious studies journal Sacra
2016–2019	Student assistant, Library of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University

Education

2019–present	Ph.D. in Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
2019–2022	M.A. in Egypt and the Ancient Near East, specialisation Assyriology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
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Participation in grants

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Publications

2023	"Cultural Transfer in Light of Seth Baʿal and Their Relationship." In Robert Rollinger, Irene Madreiter, Martin Lang and Cinzia Pappi (eds.), *The Intellectual Heritage of the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the 64th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale and the 12th Melammu Symposium, University of Innsbruck, July 16-20, 2018* (Melammu Symposia 12), Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2023, 443–458.
2022	František V., Mokrý M. et al. (eds.) *Sacra 2022 (20/1): Bohové, démoni a lidé východního Středomoří ve starověku*.
2021	"Foreigners and Religion at Ugarit." *Studia Orientalia Electronica* [online]. Finnish Oriental Society, 2021 (9/2), 47–66.

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Other results

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2022 Lehečka, B., Novák, D., Kersch, F., Hladík, R., Bíšková, J., Sekyrová, K., Válek, F., Vozár, Z., Bodnár, N., Sekan, P., Bežová, M., Žabička, P., Lhoták, M., Straňák, P. 2022 *Metodika přípravy dat z digitálních knihoven pro využití v digitálních humanitních vědách*. Knihovna AV ČR, v. v. i., Certifikovaná metodika DG20P02OVV002.

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2023 "Towards Visualising Religion – Three Cases from Ancient Ugarit" presented at *20th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions: Religions and Technology*, Vilnius, 4th–8th September 2023.

2023 "The epics of Aqhat and Kirta: Constructing royal ideology in times of crisis?" presented at 68th *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Leiden,* 17th–20th July 2023.

2022 "Religionistická mapa literárních významů: Citace Bible v prvorepublikovém tisku – use case z oblasti religionistiky" presented at *Konference DL4DH – Digital Libraries for Digital Humanities: Vytěžování obsahu digitálních knihoven pro výzkum v humanitních vědách,* Prague, 7th December 2022.

2022 (co-authored with Jan Hajič) "Authorship classification at varying levels of delexicalisation," presented at *Conference on Authorial Style, It's Analysis, and Limits of Automatic Recognition*, National Library of the Czech Republic, 27th September 2022.

2022 "Bible Quotations in the Czech Press: a Digital Humanities Intertextuality Case Study," presented at *Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions*, University College Cork, 27th June–1st July 2022.

2019 "Foreigners and Religion at Ugarit," presented at *The Strange and the Familiar: Identity and Empire in the Ancient Near East, University of Helsinki,* 22nd–24th August 2019.

2018 "Cultural Transfer in the Light of Seth Baꜥal and Their Relationship," presented at *64. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Innsbruck,* 16th–20th July 2018.

2017 "Božská pitka ve starověkém Ugaritu: KTU 1.114 jako projev antistruktury," presented at *Mezinárodní studentské vědecké konferenci, Slovácký dvůr,* 29th–31st May 2017.