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Heidelberg, 06/05/2016

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Expert assessment to Evelyne Koubková's master thesis

Washing the mouth of a kettledrum

Peer reviewing a publication or an academic thesis fairly often tends to be a hard job. But in the present case things are quiet easy: Evelyne Koubková has submitted a learned and innovative analysis of a textually well-known, but analytically marginalized ritual. On the one hand the author's interpretation rests upon a thorough philological inventory, and on the other hand Koubková combines her reconstruction of the textual sources with an outstanding interpretation, based on the most recent ritual theory. Added together this leads her to a meticulous presentation of the mouth-washing-ritual concerning a kettledrum recorded in some Mesopotamian cuneiform texts and to a new understanding of the ceremony, that clearly reaches far beyond the current status of research.

Theoretically Koubková joins philological accuracy concerning the cuneiform text sources with an excellent expertise in analytical issues – ranging from reflections on historiography or the question of how to think of gods and divine

images in Mesopotamian contexts to some intriguing problems of modern ritual theory concerning ritual purity, divine agencies in ritual objects and the way to initialize those supernatural forces by performing specific and very complex rituals like the mouth-opening-ceremony. Bearing in mind that Assyriologists usually and for good reasons focus on editing projects and therefore are not so much interested in reconstructing the religious history mirrored in the cuneiform texts it really is an impressive and in the best sense transdisciplinary approach Koubková's comprehensive study leads us to. In a nutshell, the theoretical and reflexive level Koubková provides us with in the current thesis complies with all the requirements of a substantial research study and exceeds the needs of a traditional master thesis by far.


The study's outline is as clear as coherent. Starting from a brief, but instructive "Introduction" (chap. I) Koubková focuses on ritual performances in the Mesopotamian tradition in order to reconstruct the specific mouth-washing-ritual concerning a kettledrum as far as possible and thereby shed some light on the "status of the ritual objects treated in this way" (p. 12). This ambitious conception leads us in the following section on "Ancient Mesopotamian god conceptions" (chap. II) to a well considered and broadly read analysis of the "dingir", a cuneiform sign usually read as a semantic ascription of divine character which in a way is a highly problematic interpretation for a "dingir"-kettledrum missing any personal divine aspects. Koubková for the first time calls attention to this intricate problem and rightly points out the ethnocentric perspective of such misleading interpretations which are based on Christian models of understanding gods and religions. Chap. III on "Mouth washing(s)" deals with another uncertainty – this time caused by different variants of the ritualistic performances used for either purity-reasons or for imbedding the goddess' presence into a ritualistic object (for example into the statue of a deity). Koubková thoroughly compares the textual evidences of the mouth-washing-ritual and the well-known ritual for mouth-opening. Despite there – due to some diverging text

variants – cannot be stated a coherent identity between these two kinds of somehow familiar ceremonies, they still stay most probably in a quiet near relationship. So it seems to be reasonable, when Koubková puts the ritual for a kettledrum into the ritualistic interpretation frame given by the mouth-washing-ceremony. What follows is a detailed and fine-grained description of the ritual, based on a close reading of the differing textual versions (chap. IV: “Case study: Ritual for covering a kettledrum”). Koubková demonstrates a great familiarity with the cuneiform sources as well as with the research literature written on that topic. But still more impressive is that she systematically tried to get to the bottom of the religio-historical background of the described ritual. Certainly, this undertaking could not be completed in the thesis, but this is not part of the author’s responsibility, but happened solely due to the lacunarity of the textual sources. Finally, Koubková provides the reader with a short, but convincing summary of the most important outcomes of her analysis. Last but not least the reader finds two appendices illustrating the high level of the author’s philological skills, a concordance of the various textual versions, a list of abbreviations, and a rich and soledly presented bibliography that attests the author’s broad intellectual horizon and great literacy.

Technically the current thesis sticks out far above average. Koubková’s analysis is characterized by philological accuracy as well as great familiarity with the style of scientific writing. Particularly remarkable is the large number of scientific footnotes documenting references to the books cited on the one hand and the thoroughness on the other hand by which the author forms lots of the footnotes to small, but noteworthy treatises for themselves.

Conclusion: Evelyne Koubková exploits in her master thesis a complex Mesopotamian ritual concerning a kettledrum as a ritual object. The author analyzes textual sources from different periods in a philologically solid and irreproachable way. Most notably she adds some outstanding considerations on the religio-

historical background of the ceremony and exceeds thereby the current status of research. Altogether the author accomplishes all the requirements for a distinguished master thesis. I therefore mark the present thesis with the **best grade (1)**.


(PROF. DR. GREGOR AHN)

