

Thinking, Speaking and Representing Animals in Western Asia



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Thinking, Speaking and Representing Animals in Western Asia

Edited by
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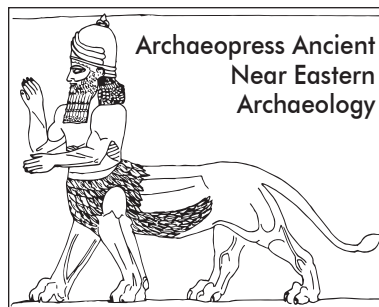
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Back cover: Votive statue of a dog, dedicated by a physician from Lagash to the goddess Ninisina, 'for the life of Sumu-El', king of Larsa (1894–1866 BC). Louvre, AO 4349. From Wikipedia, Marie-Lan Nguyen, CC BY-SA 2.5, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Votive_dog_Louvre_AO4349_n2.jpg



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Preface

This book is the result of three years of sessions devoted to animals at the American School of Overseas Research meetings (ASOR 2018-2021). Due to the pandemic, no sessions on animals were held in 2020. In other years, the discussions were fascinating and allowed for the exchange of different points of view.

Some of the articles, which deal with the symbolic aspects of animals, have already been published in *Ash Sharq* 8/2 (2024). Here is a summary of the journal: Lorenzo Verderame's article on bears in Mesopotamia, Margaret Cool Root's article on ibex in Iran, Pernille Bangsgaard, Lisa Yeomans, Hojjat Darabi and Tobias Richter on animals of central Zagros, David Ben-Shlomo's article on animals in Philistia and Judah, and finally Krystal V.L. Pierce's article on donkeys and horses in Egypt.

This book brings together eleven chapters dealing with wild animals, from the smallest, such as mongooses and lizards, to the largest, which deserve the interest of kings, such as deer and lions. Other contributions have been published elsewhere or are still awaiting publication.

Sessions at ASOR allow for interesting interdisciplinary exchanges, not only in terms of the type of research –zooarchaeology, iconology, history–, but also between disciplines from different fields and periods –from Egypt to Iran, from the III millennium BC to the Sassanid period–. Although this book does not cover all the geographical areas addressed during the sessions, I hope that readers will find it stimulating.

Acknowledgments

My deepest thanks go to all the colleagues who participated in the sessions devoted to animals held during the ASOR meetings. Without them, this book would not have been possible. The exchange of perspectives, fields and eras allows us to better understand our fellow creatures, or, as we say in the language of animal studies, non-human animals.

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Introduction

Animals are constantly present in artistic and textual production of western Asia. Non-human animals have always been essential to human animals: in agriculture, transportation, nutrition, medicine, magic, war, religion, royal ideology, and leisure. Thanks to ethology and animal studies, our understanding of animals has greatly expanded today, eventually including studies on animal suffering and disability.

This book brings together historians, archaeologists, and archaeozoologists on the theme of wild animals and on the complex relationships between humans and animals. The geographical area under consideration is vast, extending from Egypt to Iran, passing through Jordan and Mesopotamia. The periods considered range from the 3rd millennium BCE to the 1st millennium CE., and more particularly the Akkadian, Ur III, Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, Roman-Byzantine, and Sasanian periods. The animals studied include chickens, pigeons, turtledoves, partridges, francolins, corvids, buzzards, vultures, eagles, geese, mongooses, snakes, lizards, scorpions, mice, martens, bulls, horses, donkeys, deer, lions, wolfs and dogs. They are studied on different media: bones, rock reliefs, palace reliefs, statues, terracottas, seals, omīna, *Šumma ālu*, *Enūma Anu Enlil*, royal texts, wisdom literature, *andarz* literature. The wealth of cross-disciplinary approaches allows for a better understanding of the animal over a long-term trend.

The book consists of two parts. The first focuses on small animals, such as birds, mongooses, lizards, snakes, scorpions, mice. The second part is devoted to large animals, which deserve the interest of kings, such as deer, lions and dogs. The first five articles concern small animals; two are devoted to birds. The first article (by Hervé MONCHOT and Lionel GOURICHON, *A sparrow in the hand is better than the pigeon on the roof*": *An aviary in the steppe, Khirbet es-Samra, Jordan*) presents the bird remains found at the site of Khirbet es-Samra, a Roman-Byzantine village in northern Jordan. The study of birds provides a wealth of information that allows us to understand and reconstruct the paleoenvironment. In Samra for example, birds confirm an open scrubby steppe environment, associated with a human presence and allowing some to nest. Migratory birds are also present, coming from the Dead Sea or the Jordan Valley. The study of birds gives a lot of information on the taphonomic history of the bone assemblage. In Samra, several causes explain the presence of birds: natural death, domestic species, predation by humans, predation by small carnivores and predation by birds of prey.

The second article dedicated to birds (by Laura BATTINI, *Mesopotamian Changes in Human-Birds-Landscape Relations as Reconstructed by Archaeological and Iconographic Data from Akkadian to Old Babylonian Period: Seals from the British Museum*) focuses on their Mesopotamian iconology. Unlike other animals, the representation of birds is not very common. They appear more often on seals and terracottas than in official works of art. For example, of the 1,562 seals from the Akkadian to the Old Babylonian period kept in the British Museum, only a few portray birds and even less birds in their natural environment. The period covered in this article makes it easy to track important changes in the representation of birds on seals from the Akkadian to the Old Babylonian periods. The changes in their representation over 600 years reflect the sensory experience that inspired art. The Akkadian and Ur III empires were centered on Lower Mesopotamia, the region of marshes, eagles, waterfowl, geese, and other Anatidae. With the Old Babylonian period, the political centre shifted further north, and the south remained marginal. Environmental and political changes were responsible for the shift in artists' sensory experience and the drastic decline in the representation of Anatidae.

The third article (by Nicole LUNDEEN and Maya RINDERER, *The Reptilian Omens: Animal Symbolism and Linguistic Patterns in an Ancient Mesopotamian Divinatory Text*) analyzes the reptilian omīna present in the divinatory text *Šumma ālu ina mēlê šakin*, the most important source for animal omens from ancient Mesopotamia. Snakes and lizards are complex animals, imbued with chthonic connotations. Snakes

can represent a deadly threat to humans, while lizards, due to their physical resemblance to snakes, are also associated with negative notions. Furthermore, their habitat close to the ground and the underworld explains their links with death, rebirth, and disease, themes common among the omnia. Snakes and lizards often serve as metaphors for humans, especially adversaries, due to their intrusive and competitive behaviors. In *Šumma ālu*, the links between descriptions of animals and outcomes are established through a system of symbolic and linguistic similarities that uses repetition and associations at the semantic, phonetic, and graphic levels. This system of similarities also establishes links between different omnia in order to organize sequences of omnia. The approach of this article offers insight into the ancient Mesopotamian worldview, where animals are used as symbolic tools to explore societal concerns and cultural interests.

The fourth article (Françoise LAROCHE, *The Mongoose, a Wild Animal in Natural, Religious and Domestic Contexts*) considers mongooses in a large geographic area from Egypt to Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, its presence is well attested in antiquity by texts and remains of fauna. In Egypt, textual and iconographic documents show that mongooses could have been perceived as wild and protectors, venerated as deities or used as domestic animals. Their principal use was the hunting of rodents and especially snakes in houses as well as shops. They could also have been used to attack crocodile eggs and thus reduce the population. Their use as pets cannot be ruled out, although it is attested much later and in another Mediterranean region, the imperial Rome of Martial.

The fifth and last article of Part one (by Lucrezia MENICATTI, *Animals, Drums, and the Roll of Thunder. Animal Symbolism in an Omen Sequence from the Astrological Omen Series Enūma Anu Enlil*) deals with both large and small animals: francolins, geese, snakes, scorpions, mice, martens, bulls, horses, donkeys, and even dragons. What is interesting is the relation between animals, sounds and natural phenomena. The article analyzes a sequence of twenty omnia which pertain to Tablet 44 of the astrological omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*. They all deal with thunder, comparing it through simile to various animals and musical instruments (cymbal, *alû* drum, and kettledrum). Sound plays a fundamental role in this sequence, thunder being primarily an acoustic phenomenon. It is also a symbolic sound, often described as Adad's voice (*rigmu*, "noise") and it can express his anger. Animal symbolism plays a pivotal role in shaping the structure of this omen sequence on two levels: it influences the specific outcome predicted in the apodosis; and it leads to the association of animals with musical instruments, due to numerous homonymies. In addition, the similar symbolic values attributed to different animals determine their consecutive placement within the sequence.

Six articles compose the second part of the book. The first one (by Arvin MAGHSOUDLOU, *Wisdom in Stone: A New Perspective on the Late Sasanian Deer Hunt Relief at Taq-e Bustan*) focuses on deer, animal worth the king's interest. This article underscores the interplay between visual arts and literary works in the broader artistic and cultural landscape of late antique and early medieval Iran. It analyzes a royal deer hunt located within the great ayvan of Taq-e Bustan (western Iran) and dated to the final decades of the Sasanian period (225-651 CE). One of these reliefs shows the Sasanian king refraining from hunting a female animal and seemingly sparing her life. As in Neo-Assyrian empire, hunting is a symbolic and political meaning also in Sasanian empire. Moreover, in Sasanian period, it reflects ethical ideals and conveys moral lessons. Hunting was not only an act of virility and physical prowess, but also an example of measure and moderation, qualities characteristic of noblemen. Wisdom literature, such as *Andarz ī Ošnārī Dānāg*, warns against waste in hunting and unnecessary harming of animals. An important aspect of the noble conduct emphasized in the *andarz* texts was the exposition of the ideals of chivalry and caring for the defenseless. In the context of hunting, this notion could be demonstrated by the careful

selection of prey and the conscious avoidance of killing immature animals, or nursing and pregnant females.

The three following articles deal with lions. The first article (by Paul COLLINS, *'Pet' Lions at the Assyrian Cour*) focuses on Ashurbanipal's idyllic banquet scene representing tamed lions near the king and the queen in the garden. Fused with references to epic, myth and history, Assyrian reliefs allow for multiple layers of meaning. This representation can be associated with festivals linked to the goddess Ishtar, in which the passive lions evoke a vision of a world where chaos is subdued, in line with Ishtar's power to reverse the order of things. The scene also finds parallels with the love lyrics of the god Nabu and his wife Tashmetu in which the sexually charged descriptions include the delight of shade provided by cedars and junipers while birds twitter in the trees. Another detail in the scene confirms this interpretation: the king is not wearing his royal crown, but that of the prince. In this way, the king evokes his relationship with Ishtar and thus embodies Nabu, the crown prince of Ashur and Ishtar and this might help to explain why the North Palace is described in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions as 'the crown prince's residence'. Rich in symbolism and ritual import the reliefs from the North Palace equate the Assyrian king and queen with the power and majesty of their gods in multiple ways, not least their ability to triumph over evil forces as represented by aggressive lions. The result is a tamed and peaceable world.

The second article deals also with Ashurbanipal's reliefs (by Chikako WATANABE, *Mesopotamian Lions in Captivity*). In Mesopotamia, lion (*Panthera leo*) was regarded as a typical animal of the wild. In reality, some lions were kept in captivity, tamed and bred under human control. In the palace of Ashurbanipal alongside depictions of hunted lions, tamed lions are also represented. Hunted lions are shown being released from a cage to be hunted by the king. Tamed lions are represented inside an Assyrian royal garden together with courtiers and musicians standing nearby. Royal inscriptions record an extraordinary number of lions killed (450 by Ashurnasirpal II, 640 by Shalmaneser III). Then, in Ashurbanipal's period, the sudden decline in numbers may reflect a decrease in the leonine population at the time as a result of the extensive exploitation by the previous hunts. Royal inscriptions mention also lions caught alive and brought back to the capital, where they were bred and could also have been displayed to the public. A good amount of administrative texts concerns the food devoted to lions during the Middle Assyrian period. Tamed lions serve for royal hunts, and for pets but when killed their skin, hair and other parts of the body were used in rituals.

The third article on lions (by Tallay ORNAN, *In the Beginning was a Male: Ancient Near Eastern Visual Gender Bias of the Lion and the Lioness*) attempts to explain the fundamental contradiction that appears in depictions of lions: contrary to nature, where lionesses are the hunters, representations from the ancient Near East present the male lion as the predatory hunter. This reversal of gender roles stems from an ancient Near Eastern male-centered ideology that normalized and codified inequality between women and men. Women were perceived as passive and immobile, while men appeared to be active and in motion. Unlike men, who could engage in all sorts of activities, goddesses and mortal women had only one activity: seducing men with their body. The ancient Near Eastern preference for portraying front-facing females emphasizes their sexual organs, but also demonstrates the conceived restriction of bodily motions expressing their passiveness. Lion hunts can therefore be interpreted as an expression of male power, including sexual vigor, and a demonstration of masculinity.

The last two articles deal with dogs, and are complementary, the first being essentially based on textual evidence while the second is based on iconography. The first article (by Nele ZIEGLER, *Dogs in Hammurabi's Days*) analyzes dogs from the Old Babylonian period. Their presence is attested more often in domestic and religious contexts than in the palace. The king of Mari had requested specific breeds of dogs, but administrative texts do not record dogs living inside the palace. However, some of king's highest dignitaries kept dogs as an integral part of their household. The animals served to accompany

their masters on hunts, to protect their flocks and to participate in dog fights. Dogs were so closely linked to humans that some people have first names derived from dogs (especially *Kalbatum*, “Bitch” and *Mērānum*, “Puppy”, while *Kalbu* “Dog” is rare and essentially used for slaves). Moreover, people often compared themselves or others to these animals: “dog” could mean a “good, faithful servant,” while on the contrary, it served as an insult against enemies.

The last article (by Trudy KAWAMI, *Big Babylonian Dogs. Why Do Big Dogs Appear in the Art of Babylonia in the Early Second Millennium BC?*) concerns mastiff-type dogs, documented in art and texts, particularly during the Third Dynasty of Ur and Old Babylonian period. They have been identified as guard dogs or stock herders. In reality, their massive bodies and smooth coats do not give them the speed necessary to fend off an attack from a wolf or jackal, and their short, smooth fur offers no protection against heat, cold, or wet. Mastiff are luxury dogs, not suited to the climate of Babylonia. Their robust build and short, broad muzzle do not dissipate heat easily. These dogs require special care, a suitable diet, and ample hydration. Furthermore, their appearance cannot be maintained without human intervention. Basic characteristics must be constantly selected for in breeding stock. As a prestige animal, mastiffs were not working domesticates but a symbol of social status, a guardian, and a companion. For herding and protecting flocks, the dogs must be medium-sized and have a dense coat, as they are exposed to all weather conditions, like the Saluki/Saluqis. Many seals from Tepe Gawra and Susa depict this type of dog.