What Can Eliade Still Say to Assyriology?

The Reception of a Historian of Religions in Ancient Near Eastern Studies

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Abstract: The work and thinking of Mircea Eliade represent a fundamental turning point in modern history of religion. His work on the concept of the sacred was strongly innovative. However, the reception of Eliade's philosophy was and is still today strongly criticised for many reasons, one of them is the accuracy of his method. The present work does not aim to "rehabilitate" the past work of the philosopher as to re-evaluate it in the light of Assyriology and analyse his reception in the field. The main question is whether his approach might be closer to ancient thinking than the one of other modern theories.

1. Introduction

The historian of religions Mircea Eliade made some fundamental contributions to his field. Although his many interests included Mesopotamian religion, literature, and myth, he was often little taken into account by Assyriologists. This paper aims therefore to analyse his work from an Assyriological perspective and look at his reception in the field. The question is then the following: can he still contribute to Ancient Near Eastern Studies and if so, to which degree? I will answer these questions by identifying some valuable aspects of Eliade's thinking that have been largely neglected in the field.

2. Life[1]

Eliade was born in Bucharest in 1907. In 1928 he completed his philosophy degree at the University of Bucharest with a thesis on Tommaso Campanella, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno, already showing his interest in early modern philosophy. Thereafter he made an Indian sojourn (1929–1931), where he consolidated his interest in Indian philosophy and spiritualism. He completed his doctoral thesis on yogic techniques, and then he returned to Romania to serve in the military. Thereafter, he began to teach under the assistance of Nae Ionescu, professor of logic and metaphysics, and ideological leader of the Legion of the Archangel Michael (popularly known as the Iron Guard). His more or less direct association with the Iron Guard,[2] which was historically connected with terrorism and pro-Nazism, caused him some troubles including incarceration. His political conservatism through all these years remained constant, even if sometimes ambivalent. Needless to say, his far-right tendency was and is still today the main source of criticism directed at him. Several studies have been conducted regarding this controversial part of his life and I will not repeat them here.[3] From

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[1] All information about the life of Eliade according to Olson 1–7.

[2] See *ibid.* 3–4.

[3] See, e.g., the strong position of *ibid.* 4–5: 'Even if Eliade was a hard-core Fascist throughout his life, for which I have not found any evidence, this political

1941 to 1945 he lived in Lisbon, where he was appointed as a cultural adviser to the Romanian legation. From 1950 onwards, he lived in the United States, where he received a permanent position at the University of Chicago in 1957. He remained there until he died in 1986.

Among his most famous books are *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (first edition of 1949), *The Sacred and the Profane* (first edition of 1957), and *A History of Religious Ideas* (first edition of 1975). He devoted several works, specifically chapters, to Mesopotamia (see in detail § 6).

3. Criticism

The figure of Eliade is nowadays considered controversial. Besides his far-right tendency, one of the main criticisms directed at him concerns methodology; in particular, the over-generalisation of ancient cultures due to the lack of empirical support, lack of guiding principles in the selection of data, and lack of distinction between primary and secondary sources.[4] The question of sources should be addressed, although not all his works, especially not the last ones can be designated as 'overgeneralised' to the same extent. My intention here is not so much to update and revise the Assyriological sources he quoted, but rather to consider which of his concepts are still valid for the study of cuneiform sources. Furthermore, his field of interest was explicit and intentional: 'The better to bring out the specific characteristics of life in a world capable of becoming sacred, I shall not hesitate to cite examples from many religions belonging to different periods and cultures.'[5] In other words, what e.g. Olson called 'universalism of [Eliade's] vision',[6] others called overgeneralisation.

Another criticism addresses his so-called ahistorical approach, accusing him of under-valuing the historical particularities in favour of general models. This critique reflects the specific historical context of the debate between Historicism and Phenomenology of Religions: most of Eliade's critics were Historicists, while Eliade can be identified as a phenomenologist. Both approaches present advantages and disadvantages, and this point will be discussed in detail in § 5.

4. The Sacred and its Related Concepts

One of the most important concepts in Eliade's thought, which is still applicable to Ancient Near Eastern studies, is the conception of the sacred, to which all the others are linked: it exists in the world as an autonomous reality.

> Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them. Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred and hence instantly becomes saturated with being because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on. The object appears as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value.[7]

Thus, the sacred is considered as a force that confers true reality to entities when it becomes present, 'manifest', in the world. This understanding profoundly differs from other positions in the history of religions, like the Historicists or Sociologists, who consider the sacred a historical or social construction.[8] The sacred is a non-reducible category (category *sui generis*), which cannot be reduced to any other

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ideology did not affect his scholarship to any sinister extent, and it is unjust to taint someone and to judge them guilty by association.'
[4] For a review of Eliade's critics see *ibid*. 7–11, and in particular that of Smith (1978).

[5] Eliade 1959, 15.
[6] Olson 1992, 12.
[7] Eliade 1954, 3–4.
[8] For this debate see Filoramo 2004, 63–70.

kind of force (i.e. mental in Psychology of Religion, social in Sociology of Religion, etc.).

Furthermore, Eliade's concept of sacred is contrasted with the profane: 'the archaic world knows nothing of "profane" activities: every act which has a definite meaning—hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality, in some way participates in the sacred.'[9] The only profane activities would be those which lack a mythical model (an archetype) and there is no word for them since they do not possess the same reality. However, this perception of the ancient man (the *homo religiosus*) has evolved and the modern man is profane: 'desacralisation pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies and […], in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of the religious man in the archaic societies.'[10] While for Eliade the distinction between sacred and profane is mainly (but not only) temporal, other scholars applied such difference among the same present time.[11]

This view implies an idealisation of the ancient man at the expense of modern man, who is 'non-religious'. Modern scholars of ancient religions would thus belong to the latter category. Although a little bit simplistic, such vision allows for a better demarcation of the conceptual differences, or limitations, of modern scholars, who are interpreting the thinking of ancient cultures. It helps to make boundaries between emic and etic more defined, which presents a challenge in Assyriology, too. This is an example of an epistemological problem in studying ancient cultures:

> It is useless to search archaic languages for the terms so laboriously created by the great philosophical traditions: there is every likelihood that such words as 'being,' 'non-

being,' 'real,' 'unreal,' 'becoming,' 'illusory,' are not to be found in the language of the Australians or of the ancient Mesopotamians. But if the word is lacking, the thing is present; only it is 'said' that is, revealed in a coherent fashion through symbols and myths.[12]

Searching for terms typical of the philosophical tradition, like 'real' or 'unreal', in languages that precede the coinage of such terms is simply anachronistic. At the same time, claiming the existence of a concept, although not attestable, can raise methodological concerns. However, keeping in mind the possibility of such concepts is extremely useful in our attempt to interpret ancient texts such as cuneiform records, and when other data are lacking; it expands the possibilities of interpretation. B. Alster already said something similar: 'Unless we [Assyriologists] understand these [Eliade's] ideas, we shall never hope to be able to translate basic terms in Mesopotamian texts with some degree of justification.'[13]

Furthermore, the sacred can be more or less dense within space and time. In space, the Centre is a place where the sacred concentrates; it is intended in an ontological rather than a geographical sense. It constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space and thus creates passages from one cosmic region to another (heaven, earth, and netherworld); in some traditions, it is the cosmic axis (*axis mundi*) around which the world lies:[14] cities, temples, and mountains lie at this axis, at the Centre.[15] This is particularly valid in Mesopotamia as well, where temples represent the bond between heaven and earth, as already noted by Alster, speaking about how Eliade understood such connection: 'It is tragicomic to observe that the essential ideas in the Gudea Cylinders have been better understood by scholars who have never been able to read a

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[9] Eliade 1954, 27–28.
[10] Eliade 1959, 13.
[11] See, e.g., Bell 2009, 91.
[12] Eliade 1954, 3–4.

[13] Alster 1976, 20, fn. 32.
[14] Eliade 1959, 37.
[15] Eliade 1954, 5.

cuneiform sign, than by Assyriologists who wrote entire books about them.'[16] Another example is the Mesopotamian dichotomy between the steppe and the city. The first symbolises the profane uncivilised world of chaos, in a stage of pre-creation, where uncultivated regions lie. The second represents the sacralisation of such regions; the occupation of territory, intended as the city and its 'civilised' surroundings, through colonisation means a symbolic repetition of the original act of creation.[17]

In a similar vein, sacred time stands in opposition to profane time. The sacred time is the mythical time beyond, and before, history, which happened 'in that time' (*in illo tempore*). This time can be recreated in history through ritual acts and festivals, which 'deliberately repeat such and such acts posited *ab origine* by gods, heroes, or ancestors.'[18] On the contrary, the profane time is the ordinary temporal duration, and it can be periodically stopped through rituals, which 'can be homologised to eternity'.[19] The effort to go back to the sacred time is the core idea presented in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. This is related to another key concept, the terror of history: the ancient man constantly tries to abolish the flow of historical time by tapping into the sacred time by means of transhistorical models. Whereas the man of the ancient civilisations 'accorded the historical event no value in itself; in other words, he did not regard it as a specific category of his own mode of existence'; the modern man 'consciously and voluntarily creates history'.[20] While the concept of the sacred time is certainly largely present in Ancient Near Eastern myths and rituals, it does not imply any attempt to escape from the real world to an imaginative one.[21]

5. Historicism

One of the problems addressed by Eliade against Historicism indeed concerns the terror of history. How can it be tolerated by Historicism?[22]

Moving one step backwards, the debate between Historicism and Phenomenology within the history of religion can be summarised as follows: for the former, the sacred is socially constructed, for the latter it is independently present in the world.[23] Eliade saw in Hegel's thought the break between the 'ancient' and the 'modern' man; with him begins every effort 'directed toward saving and conferring value on the historical event as such', since for him 'the historical event was the manifestation of the Universal Spirit.'[24]

Eliade reviewed many theories of Historicists concerning what he called the terror of history and could not find a valid answer in any of them: some of them put, e.g., a mythical age not at the *beginning* of history, but rather at the *end*.[25] With such an argument, which is only partially valid for Historicism at Eliade's time, he meant to question the concept of history as a linear progressive direction. It is therefore hardly surprising, that the criticism towards Eliade of being 'ahistorical' is to be found in such debate.

Within Ancient Near Eastern studies, M.-A. Ataç stated that ideologies of escaping history existed despite historiographical texts; moreover, they 'were never divorced from ritual paradigms of sacral time and sacral history'.[26] Therefore, the phenomenological approach seems closer to the Mesopotamian conception than Historicism. This statement does not imply in any way that Historicism is

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[16] Alster 1976, 19, fn. 28.
[17] *Ibid.* 9–11.
[18] *Ibid.* 5. See also more recently Podemann Sørensen 2003, 159.
[19] Eliade 1959, 70.
[20] Eliade 1954, 141.

[21] *Ibid.* 94.
[22] *Ibid.* 150.
[23] For broader analysis see Filoramo 2004, 63–70.
[24] Eliade 1954, 141/ 147–148.
[25] *Ibid.* 147–154.
[26] Ataç 2018, 23–24.

less valid than Phenomenology, but that the latter, for a long time fallen into disgrace, can offer some valid understanding. Sometimes scholarship takes a certain direction for a specific reason, as the case of this debate has shown, and discards some valid insights together with the ones it dismisses. In other words, both approaches should be valued and addressed critically.

6. Eliade and the Ancient Near East

Until now we have seen some aspects of Eliade's thought that are potentially applicable to cuneiform sources. However, Eliade himself worked specifically with such sources, with a particular focus on Mesopotamian alchemy and metallurgy in the chapter *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană* within *Alchimia asiatică* (1934), some parts of which have been incorporated into his *Metallurgy, Magic and Alchemy* (1939) and *The Forge and the Crucible* (first edition of 1956). He also treated Mesopotamian religion in the third chapter of *A History of Religious Ideas* (first edition of 1975).

Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană is an attempt to generally apply his ideas of the sacred, the Centre, and the time to the Mesopotamian civilisation. The critique of over-generalisation applies here since the quoted sources are few. However, we should keep in mind that at that time fewer secondary sources were available[27] to non-specialists than nowadays. Nevertheless, some of his concepts are still valid from a broader perspective. One of the main merits of this work concerns epistemology: he claimed that other 'sciences of nature', such as the Mesopotamian one, existed, which were not based on criteria of quantity and measure, in contrast to modern

science.[28] Furthermore, he recognised in the homology between Heaven and the World the main *Weltanschauung* of the Mesopotamian culture: everything on earth has an identical correspondence in Heaven, which serves as an ideal model. This cosmology is not only expressed in texts, since it is only by chance that specific cuneiform documents are transmitted to us, but also by means of symbols, architecture, cosmography, etc.[29] Furthermore, he recognised the sacred character of Mesopotamian metallurgy, separating it from its technical aspect within the history of chemistry, and identifying more affinities with a ritual than a technical operation. Eliade states that the difference between an 'alchemical' operation, like the purification of the oven, and a recipe, like the manufacture of the so-called *immanakku*-stone (a not yet fully understood term in Akkadian, formerly translated as 'glaze'), corresponds to the difference between sacred and profane. These two texts, brought by him as an example, belong to the same Neo-Assyrian recipe for the blue *zagindurû*-glass. What he quite surely never looked at, is that these two parts belonging to the same text are divided in the two clay tablets (K.6246+, K.203+) by dividing lines.[30] This can resemble once again Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane: the first 'sacred' introductory part corresponds to the usual purificatory part of any ritual text containing building works,[31] whereas the second indicates the proper instructions. This does not correspond to the division between incantation and technical instructions, as it usually happens in texts of this kind, rather to a division between two different actions, which, according to Eliade, are sacred and profane respectively. I'm not arguing that this is always the function of dividing lines in manuscripts of this genre,

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[27] Eliade quoted mainly Campbell Thompson (1925), Meissner (1925) and Eisler (1926), often without reference to the specific cuneiform text.
[28] Eliade 1992 [1934], 9–10.
[29] *Ibid.* 12.

[30] Eliade 1992 [1934], 56–58 with literature; see now Schmidt 2019, 122–124 ll. 1–12 for the first case, and ll. 44–49 for the second one (with earlier literature).
[31] Schmidt 2019, 125–126.

rather than in this specific case, Eliade's thought could be reflected in the manuscripts themselves.

A History of Religious Ideas is a much more mature work, where he summarises many myths and compositions (the flood,[32] Inana's Descent to the Netherworld, etc.) analysing directly several secondary sources. For example, he presented an original interpretation of the Gilgameš Epic as a failed initiation, certainly worthy of further study. Whereas Gilgameš went successfully through heroic ordeals (the journey through the tunnel, the 'temptation' by Siduri, crossing the Waters of Death), the last one, the sleep ordeal imposed by Ūta-napišti, is a 'spiritual' one: 'conquering sleep, remaining "awake," is equivalent to a transmutation of the human condition.'[33] Gilgameš's failure of the sleep ordeal represents his failure in obtaining immortality, which is, in this view, not understood as a mere unlimited amount of time, but of a spiritual nature, intended as the awakening in a higher consciousness.

7. Eliade's reception in Assyriology

Despite the aforementioned studies in Mesopotamian culture and religion, Eliade has not been, until recent times, much received in Assyriology. Different was the case of Rudolf Otto, a historian of religions, who also belonged to some degree to the stream of Phenomenology of Religion. Eliade's concept of the sacred differs from Otto's idea expressed in *Das Heilige* (2004 [1917]), which was innovative because instead of focusing on the ideas of God and religion, as it was customary at that time, he focused on the modalities of religious experience. He presented it as frightening and irrational, in other words *numinous*

(from Latin *numen* 'god'), which was furthermore 'wholly other' (*ganz andere*), in the sense that it was not expressible by human language. Eliade clearly claimed that he was neither interested in the aspect of 'otherness' nor in the irrational aspect of the sacred expressed by Otto: 'what will concern us is not the relation between the rational and non-rational elements of religion but the *sacred in its entirety*.'[34] Eliade saw the sacred as a *force* rather than an *experience*. I do not intend to underestimate Otto's conception of the sacred here, but rather contrast the two different views.

It is noteworthy that in contrast to Eliade, Otto has often been quoted in Assyriology, although he did not address cuneiform sources specifically. Jacobsen was among the first Assyriologists to apply Otto's idea of the sacred in *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (1976). Since the *numinous* cannot be described, religious metaphors 'constitute the only means of communicating [its] experience'. Here, Jacobsen attempted to trace the history of Mesopotamian religion as a history of different responses given by people at different times to the *numinous*.[35] This work is still the reference point for anyone with any degree of interest in Mesopotamian religion, whether Assyriologist or not. Otto has probably been so well received in Assyriology because of Jacobsen: his reception in the field deserves a separate study.[36]

Eliade on the other hand has only marginally been considered in Ancient Near Eastern studies. Besides the aforementioned Ataç and Alster,[37] Sommer (2000) discusses Eliade's interpretation of the Akītu festival as a renewal's act of cosmos in light of the debate with Smith (1978). Sommer finds valid arguments both for the nationalistic and political

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[32] Eliade 1978 [1975], 62–63 analyses in the chapter 'The first myth of the flood' the various compositions in which this myth appears.
[33] Eliade 1978 [1975], 77–80.
[34] Eliade 1959, 10.

[35] Jacobsen 1976, 4.
[36] See, e.g., Sallaberger (2020) about Jacobsen's *Central Concerns*.
[37] Ataç 2018, 23–24; Alster 1975, 106: 7, 9/ 10, 130–131: 3/ 10; Alster 1976, 19–20.

interpretation of the Akītu festival argued by Smith and for the ritual as a form of reordering from chaos suggested by Eliade. However, Sommer in his analysis remains quite cold and distant from Eliade's idea of the sacred.[38]

8. Conclusion

With this summary of Eliade's principal thoughts, we saw that some of his concepts are still valid and applicable to Ancient Near Eastern sources:

The sacred conceived as a natural force, of which the ancient man was aware, seems particularly appropriate. Confluences of the sacred within space and time, like temples and festivals, are perfectly suitable for the available cuneiform sources like ritual and mythical texts. The difference between the sacred and the profane, and consequently between the 'ancient' and 'modern' man, can help modern scholars to be more aware of the gap between the emic and etic ways of thinking. Eliade has reasonably stated that precise words for such a concept cannot be directly found in cuneiform sources; nevertheless, indirect evidence, like the dividing lines on some glass recipe manuscripts, can point to some degree of a division between the sacred and the profane.

The concept of history, viewed within sacred time, and disconnected from a linear progressive view, is also fully applicable to cuneiform sources, as, for example, Alster (see § 4, 7) already pointed out.

Concerning the reception in Ancient Near Eastern studies, Eliade was only marginally acknowledged in the field, whereas other historians of religions like Otto through Jacobsen had a greater impact. We can, therefore, only wish that further studies will apply the phenomenological method, such as Eliade's, to textual analysis as well, since such an approach seems closer to the ancient way of thinking. Needless to say, such an approach, as with any other, should be addressed critically, with the knowledge of both their strengths and limitations.

Acknowledgements

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[38] Sommer 2000, 95 fails, in my opinion, saying that Eliade's idea of the Centre is not archaic only: for Eliade, the definition of 'archaic' should be framed in macro-history (ancient religious as opposed to modern non-religious man), and not in micro-history (second as opposed to first millennium), as argued by Sommer and to some degree by Smith. As already said (§ 5), for Eliade, the turning point between ancient and modern man can be rather found in Hegel.

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