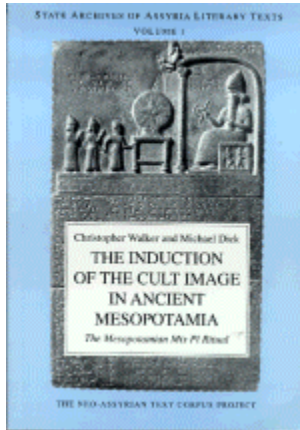


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Walker, Christopher and Michael Dick

The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mis Pi Ritual

State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts, Volume I 1

Helsinki, Finland: Neo-Assyrian Corpus Project, 2001. Pp. 267 + CD-ROM of tablet photos, Cloth, \$75.00, ISBN 9514590481.

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This book is the long-awaited first volume of SAALT, in which the more important ritual and incantational witnesses to the mouth-washing (*mīs pī*) and mouth-opening (*pīt pī*) rituals of ancient Mesopotamian religion are gathered together into one place. The two traditions discussed are the Nineveh Ritual tablet (NR) and the Babylonian Ritual tablet (BR). Both of these tablets are published here via good digital photographs followed by transcriptions, transliterations, and good English translations. This is an excellent primary sourcebook for further study of Mesopotamian ritual generally, not just for study of the *mīs pī*.

The book introduces itself with short discussions of the cult image itself, the relationship between the cult image and the deity, the titles given for the ritual (mouth-washing, mouth-opening), the roles enacted by the primary officiating priests, the history of the ritual, the growth and development of the ritual, historical references to the ritual, the date and source of the texts under study, and the overall structure of *mīs pī* (4–31). Following this the authors publish a careful composite text and English translation of what they call the Nineveh Ritual (36–67; previously published by H. Zimmern as BBR II 31–37, 38, 39), the Babylonian Ritual (70–82;

BM 45749), eight incantation tablets (84–225, the bulk of the book), and an appendix containing Aššur Tablet A.418 (226–45), previously published by E. Ebeling as TuL 27 (*Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1931–]).

The authors define the Mesopotamian mouth-washing ritual as “essentially a purificatory rite which prepared the object/person for contact with the divine. Such a purification of the mouth facilitated communication with the divine” (12–13). Inasmuch as it can be reconstructed, it follows a recognizable progression: (1) preparations in the city, in the countryside, and in the temple (NR); (2) construction of the image in the workshop (BR starts here); (3) procession from the workshop to the river; (4) ceremonies at the riverbank; (5) procession from the riverbank to the orchard; (6) ceremonies in the orchard within the reed-huts (*šutukku*) and reed-tents (*urigallū*); (7) procession from the orchard to the temple gate; (8) ceremonies at the temple gate; (9) procession from the gate to the Holy of Holies (*papāhu* and *šbtu*); (10) ceremonies at the Holy of Holies/Abode; (11) procession to the quay of the Apsû.

Following Berlejung, Walker and Dick see the *mīs pī* accomplishing several critically important functions: (1) it secures the image’s purity (via “mouth-washing”); (2) it removes all traces of human craftsmanship in order to consolidate the image’s supernatural origin; (3) it activates the image’s senses (via “mouth-opening”); (4) it determines the image’s destiny; (5) it integrates the new god into the community of sibling deities; and (6) it establishes the divine image in its own temple complex.

At one time the authors’ interpretation of *mīs pī* relied heavily on the work of Peggy Boden (“The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth [*Mīs Pī*] Ritual” [Ph.D. diss.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998]). Walker and Dick were persuaded by Boden’s argument that the ritual’s Sumerian titles probably allude to the actual process of cleansing (KA.LUḪ.Ù.DA) and opening (KA.DUḪ.Ù.DA) the breathing passages of a newborn child. Further, they were persuaded by her suggestion that the

ritual as a whole followed van Gennep's rites of passage in a unilinear progression: (1) separation of the individual from current status (preliminal rites); (2) reshaping intended to prepare the individual for its new status (liminal rites); and (3) reintroduction of the changed individual (postliminal rites).

As a result of the arguments of Angelika Berlejung (*Die Theologie der Bilder* [OBO 162; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1998]), however, their minds have changed. They still see van Gennep's tripartite pattern as helpful, but repeatedly this tripartite pattern occurs throughout *mīs pî* and not in a simple unilinear progression. Further, they are persuaded by Berlejung's understanding of the roles played by the priesthood. Where the *āsīpu* priest is responsible for initial sanctification of a new cult-statue, the *kalû* priest works on restoring old cult-statues, and the *bārû* priest is responsible for making sure that the cult-statue (new or restored) is capable of oracular communication. Each priest has his own area of specialization in this all-important business of constructing, renewing, and consecrating divine images.

Anyone interested in pursuing these matters further will find the present volume indispensable. Walker and Dick have not only given us a competent critical study of the *mīs pî* ritual, but they have also set the tone for the SAALT series.